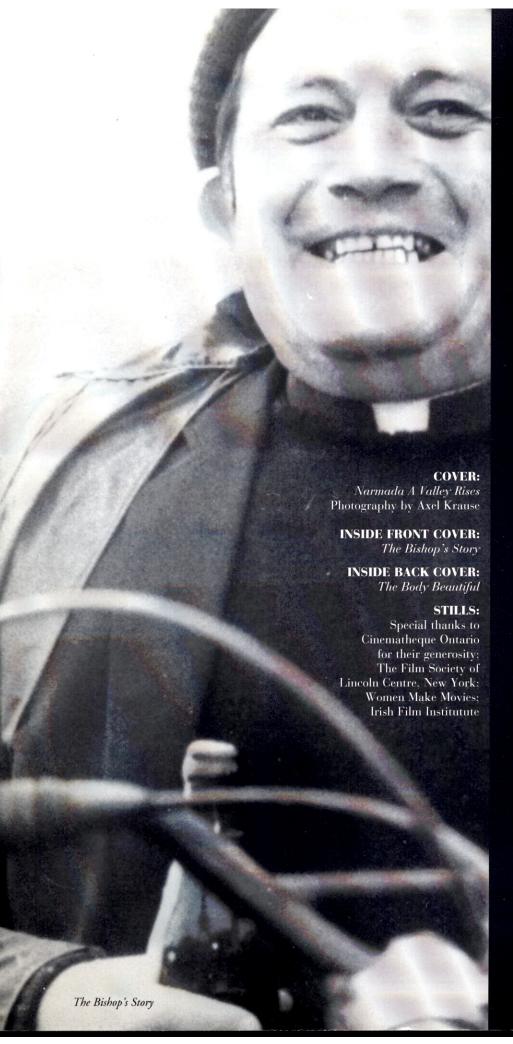
CITICACACTION RADICAL FILM CRITICISM AND THEORY NO. 37 \$7 CDN. \$6 US

Movements, History and Filmmaking



cine ACTION

THE COLLECTIVE

Kass Banning Scott Forsyth Florence Jacobowitz Richard Lippe Susan Morrison Robin Wood

DESIGN

Julie Jenkinson with assistance from Ida Fong

CineAction is published three times a year by the CineAction collective.

Single copy: \$7 Cdn. \$5. US Subscriptions: Canada and U.S.: (individual) 3 issues/\$18 (institutions) 3 issues/\$35 Overseas add \$15

Mailing Address: 40 Alexander Street Suite 705 Toronto, Canada M4Y 1B5 Fax: 416-504-3228

Manuscripts (typed, double spaced) are welcomed. They should be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed return envelope. The editors do not accept responsibility for their loss.

The opinions expressed in individual articles are not necessarily endorsed by the editorial collective.

All articles herein are copyright June 1995 by *CineAction* and may not be reproduced without permission.

We would like to thank the Ontario Arts Council, the Ontario Publishing Centre and The Canada Council for their generous support.

CineAction is owned and operated by CineAction, a collective for the advancement of film studies. CineAction is a non-profit organization.

ISSN 0826-9866 Printed and bound in Canada



contents no. 37

2 Editorial

3 The Films of Bob Quinn: Towards an Irish Third Cinema

11 An Interview with Ali Kazimi

21 Hearts of Hate and the Poverty of the Liberal Documentary

29 A Question of Narrative: Notes on a Radical Horror Parody

38 On the Rise: The Work of Ngozi Onwurah

50 The Politics of Cultural Conversion in Colonialist African Cinema

68 On Pluralism, Policy and Progress: a response to R.L. Cagle

Scott Forsyth

Jerry White

Marcy Goldberg Firoza Elavia

John McCullough

Cosimo Urbano

Julian Stringer

Femi Okiremuete Shaka

Robin Wood



Editorial

Movements, History and Filmmaking

Global capitalism can only be transformed through collective struggles and agency—through vast movements of humanity against the social order's contradictions and depredations. When capitalism seems so powerful and its ideological hegemony so authoritarian, comprehending and activating those movements remains essential for socialists and diverse radicals. If the parties of the Left are mired in electoral opportunism and the once-vaunted "new social movements" falter, this too needs our consciousness of historical possibility in the present.

Several articles collected here analyze how films and filmmaking practice, in both committed documentary and entertainment narratives, relate to social movements against new and enduring forms of class, national, gender, racial and ecological oppression and exploitation.

Capitalism itself remains characterized by movements—by chaotic stampedes of capital, by destructive relocations of production, by vast migrations of displaced, conquered and settling populations, by mobilizations for its wars, conquests and crusades for class and race privilege. Articles examine filmmakers from "diasporic" communities, the role of film in entertaining propaganda for colonialism and the ways media can expose, analyze or promote the resurgence of racism and fascism in the countries of the "first" world. In a "new world disorder" where the West proclaims its right to brutal intervention wherever its interests are threatened and where fascists are forming or shaping governments, these must be political priorities as well.

10 Years of CineAction ?????!!

Publishing a film magazine of radical film criticism and theory for ten years is a significant accomplishment of collective cultural politics. We would like to congratulate ourselves!

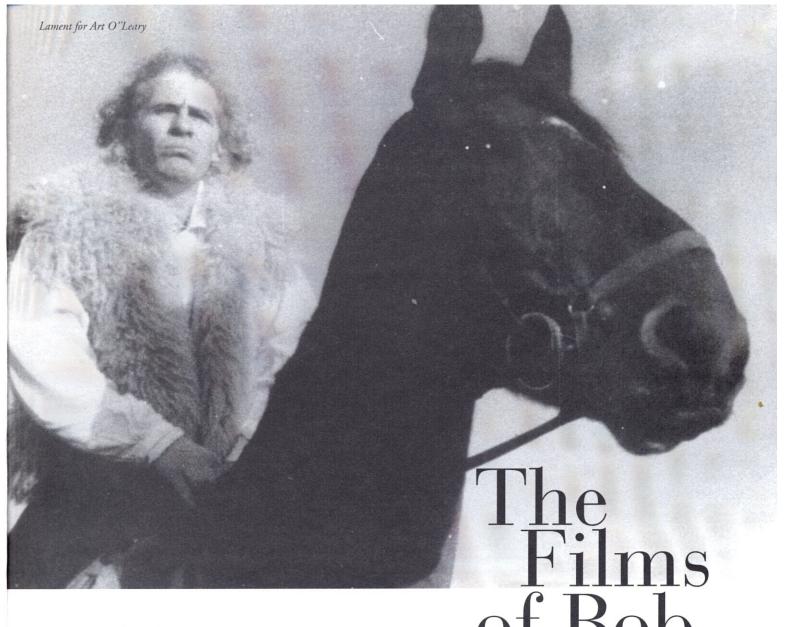
Looking back over these years, we have maintained our commitment to publish politically informed criticism on classic and contemporary Hollywood, on political documentary of varied emphasis and perspective, on experimental work, on the diverse kinds of Canadian film and video making, on theoretical and political debates.

For all of us in the editorial collective, the magazine has changed from our original expectations. To me, our issues intervene in urgent political priorities from a more distanced position than seemed necessary at our beginning. The respectable institutionalizing/anaesthetizing of cultural theory and the difficult, even demoralizing, challenges of radical politics mark these years as well. Others in the collective have a different sense of what's been achieved and what is disappointing. Our collective, as regular readers know, is marked by divisions of theoretical perspective and analytical focus familiar in the development of film studies in universities over the last decade. It is perhaps more surprising that we have maintained collaboration. We remain convinced that intellectual work is important in the politics and culture of social emancipation.

The editorial collective has changed over the ten years, of course. Bryan Bruce, Maureen Judge and Lori Spring have put criticism into practice and gone on to make their marks in filmmaking in Canada. Painfully, as I looked back over issues #1 through #36, the death of Andrew Britton seems an overwhelming loss. His writing ranged with brilliance across so many theoretical debates and so many issues from classic Hollywood to contemporary ideology to documentary history. Andrew's commitment was to complex theoretical debate, to an historical sense of the relationship between aesthetics and emancipatory potential and to the Marxist political and cultural tradition. It is the essence of what a magazine like this should be doing.

Our celebration of ten years should mark what's been lost as well as achieved, what needs to be continued and what needs to be strengthened and it must celebrate you, the readers, who still read us after all these years.

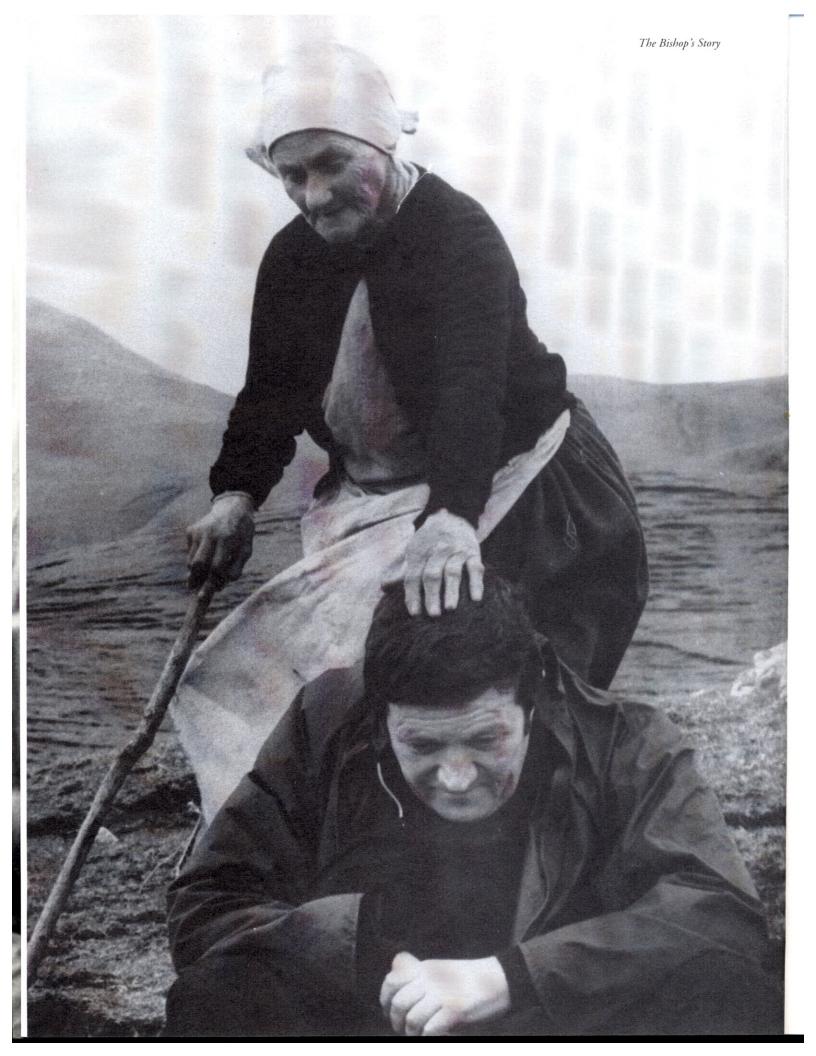
Scott Forsyth



The films of Bob Quinn, largely unseen in North America, provide an excellent example of a specifically anti-colonialist cinema functioning inside of Europe. Although the ongoing occupation of Northern Ireland is the common lightning rod for debate about Irish colonialism, Quinn steers away from this topic to engage with the way that the Irish people, especially those living in rural areas, are struggling to break away from the legacy of colonialism. Although he has made over 60 films (and is one of Ireland's most prolific filmmakers) four of them have been exhibited widely. Together, these films help to bring ongoing themes into focus. His experimental/Godardian featurette Lament for Art O'Leary (1975) and his documentary Atlantean (1983) both deal with colonialism head on, while two of his narrative films Poitin (1978) and The Bishop's Story (1994) deal more with the oppressions of living within a rural community. His work is certainly insurgent, although aside from Lament for Art O'Leary he steers away from directly inserting political content into his work. Rather, he makes films that are radically populist, arguing for the independence and autonomy of the wretched of Ireland.

Towards an
Irish Third
Cinema

by **Jerry White**



Quinn started out working for Irish state television, Radio Telefis Eirean (RTE). After instituting major changes there, he left in 1969 to start his own film company, Cinegael, based on the Connemara islands, where he has lived ever since. He has gone on to produce an incredibly wide variety of work, including features, shorts, and documentaries. All of his independent films have been made under Cinegael's umbrella, and Quinn now occupies the position of the wise veteran of Irish independent cinema. (See Patsy Murphy's essay for the Galway Film Fledh's 1993 Quinn retrospective). His latest film The Bishop's Story was somewhat of a breakthrough in that it is his first to be released in 35mm. This film, however, is a reworking of his 1987 film Budawanny (shot in 16mm, and which I do not discuss here), with a few new scenes shot in 35mm, some of the narrative reorganized and the release prints struck in the costlier gauge. "If Budawanny was the old testament," he wrote in Film Ireland, "The Bishop's Story would be the New, the fulfillment of the old." Across these genres and forms, Quinn concerns himself with the liberation of the people of Ireland, and the diversity of his work indicates his recognition of the complexity of true liberation.

LAMENT FOR ART O'LEARY

Quinn's "breakthrough" film was also a breakthrough for Irish cinema as a whole. It marked the first independently produced film completely in the Gaelic language, and it was particularly notable for its visual inventiveness. Furthermore, this fiery nationalistic tale came as its sponsor, Official Sinn Fein, an essentially socialist arm of the Sinn Fein organization, was breaking with the Provisional Sinn Fein, whose goals were more traditionally Republican. It was a film that provided a glimpse of what an insurgent Irish cinema could look like.

Lament takes place in present day Connemara, where a play based on the last great lament in the Irish language is being produced. The lament, written by O'Leary's wife Eileen, tells the story of an Irish landowner in the 18th century who returns to his family's farm, now controlled by the English. It was their defeat of the Irish chieftains that forced O'Leary into exile, and he now returns and struggles to come back to the life that he once knew. Quinn moves between footage of rehearsals in the present and the narrative of the lament, staged in 18th century costume-drama style. Although the entire cast of the play is Gaelicspeaking (as befits the population of rural Connemara), it is being directed by a stodgy English playwright. The lead actor is a loud, irreverent young man named Art Leary, who defies the Englishman at every turn and is eventually fired. When he comes riding back into the theatre on a donkey, all hell breaks loose.

The film's correlations between imperialism past

and present are obvious, but a key concern here is the use of the Gaelic language, which is important when looking at Quinn's work. Although the play's cast is bilingual, they usually speak to each other in Gaelic, to the extreme irritation of the director, who sees this as a threat to his authority. As noted Lament was the first independent film to be produced completely in Gaelic (Rockett, 137) and takes as its content the last great lament written in that language. Quinn clearly frames the language as a sight of resistance in present day Ireland, a way by which national identity may be asserted through the details of everyday life. Significantly, all four of the films discussed here are in Gaelic. That the stage director is so irritated by the way that this very basic feature of Irish culture totally excludes him is a testament to the power that it holds in the proper hands. Gaelic is taught in all public Irish schools, but too often kids (city kids, anyway) see it as irrelevant, although it is still spoken as the primary language in many rural areas. Quinn here puts language in a specifically insurgent context, explicitly showing the power of merely living as a member of a culture that modernity would have everyone forget.

Indeed, critiques of modernity run throughout Quinn's work, and these are visible here. What the lament pines for is for O'Leary's family farm to be restored to him, for tradition to be continued. This is the reason that O'Leary came back to Ireland at all, having served in the European mercenary bands as so many Irishmen did after fleeing the English takeover (most of these exiles did not return to Ireland, giving O'Leary's tale an added nationalist zing). It is the English colonialists who interrupt this tradition, just as in the present day it is the snobbish Anglophile who does his best to undermine the cast living like people in Connemara live. Throughout the film the English director exhibits a rather classic colonialist approach to the indigenous culture: confound these ungovernable people, all I'm trying to do is teach them a little culture! A big part of the project of Lament for Art O'Leary is to lay bare the ideology of "acculturation," which is typically associated with modernity. Just as the English robbed O'Leary of his land in the name of "progress," the Englishman here hopes to rob Leary of his culture and the means to express that culture.

Lament is certainly the most formally inventive of the films under discussion here, with fragmented editing that jumps freely between past and present. Indeed, in places the film is edited at a breakneck pace, equal parts Eisenstein and Brakhage. The most obvious reason for this liberty between time periods (in some scenes a line will be spoken in the present day and will then be answered by the character's 18th century counterpart) is to emphasize the link between imperialism past and present, but there are clearly other

motives at work here as well. O'Leary's occasional direct addresses to the camera and the clearly artificial way that the narrative is constructed gives the film a feel of analytical distanciation.

Indeed, the narrative is specifically anti-illusionistic, and Kevin Rockett notes that the style "draws attention to the film's construction and thereby invites the audience to participate in uncovering its meaning" (138). This Brechtian strategy was all the rage in insurgent filmmaking circles of the 1970s, recalling Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's statement that "a revolutionary cinema is not fundamentally one which illustrates, documents, or passively establishes a situation: rather, it attempts to intervene in the situation as an element providing thrust or rectification" (56, italics theirs). Furthermore, the two observe that Third cinema deals with "the great themes- the history of the country, the love and unlove between combatants, the efforts of the people that awakens— all this is reborn before the decolonized camera" (64), and all of this forms the storyline of Lament. It's correlation with Third cinema is important and hardly surprising, especially considering that during the 60s (and to a great extent today), Irish nationalism took much inspiration from Third world liberation movements. Bob Purdie writes that in the late 60s, "nationalists and separatists were able to see themselves in the reflected glory of the third world" (84). What we see in throughout the cinema of Bob Quinn, but especially in Lament, is Irish cinema as Third cinema.

The film was paid for in part by what is now known as the Worker's Party. It was then known as Official Sinn Fein, and was at that time in the midst of a split with the republican elements of Sinn Fein, the Provisionals and the Irish National Liberation Army. The Officials were less interested in utopic dreams of nationalism than in the nuts and bolts of socialist organizing. The president of the Worker's Party said of the film that "Courageous campaigns of resistance, however noble their inspiration, will fail like the gesture of Art O'Leary if they try to ignore realities... Romantic acts of heroism or defiance may inspire people but will never organize them" (Cited in Rockett, 138). But while O'Leary's lone act of defiance is defeated, this image of collective organizing is present in the Gaelic speaking amateur players. The final sequence of the film is their attendance at the 18th century funeral of the martyred O'Leary, following which they retire to a pub filled with traditional music.

POITIN

Quinn's next film was the recipient of the first script grant from the newly formed Arts Council (Rockett 129). The legitimacy that such a grant might bestowed was quickly dispelled when *Poitin* was completed in time to be aired on St. Patrick's Day, 1979.

The Irish public was outraged, and calls to ban the film rang out. The reasons for this kind of agitation are not hard to see: Quinn's tale of a hermetic distiller paints a picture of the West of Ireland utterly opposed to conventional romantic notions of the area (he notes, in Film Ireland among other places, that he made the film as a response to The Quiet Man). Quinn here seeks to expose the elements of the Celtic identity that are most unappealing to the bourgeois/Europeanized sector of Irish society. However, Quinn goes out of his way to avoid romanticizing this existence, showing it to be defined by alienation and frustration.

The story focuses around Poitin, an incredibly strong Irish liquor (roughly equivalent, culturally and alcoholically, to moonshine). Cyril Cusak plays an old distiller who lives on the Connemara islands with his grown daughter (Mairead Ni Conghaile), and employs two outcasts to sell the stuff. When a bunch of the liquor entrusted to the selling agents is seized by the police, the two steal it back and sell it off, getting drunk off the proceeds. When they get thrown out of the pub where they had been sloshing themselves all night, they make for the distiller's house in search of yet more liquor. They generally abuse Cusak's character and attempt to rape his daughter, but he has the last, dark laugh when he convinces them to row out into the middle of the water outside his house in a leaky boat.

Colin McArthur, in his essay "The Cultural Necessity of a Poor Celtic Cinema," proposes an oppositional relationship between "homo oeconomicus," standing for Aryan European culture, and "homo celticus," Celtic culture. He identifies the following traits: "urban/rural, civilized/uncivilized, barbered/hirsute, cultured/natural, 'masculine' / 'feminine'" (118). He identifies the Celtic features as "'all the 'negative' features the European Bourgeois did not wish to have." McArthur's specific cinematic context here is not Irish but Scottish cinema, but he seems to have been talking about the very aspects that make *Poitin* so upsetting to respectable society and such a vibrant variation in the Irish nationalist struggle.

The way that Quinn represents the two selling agents is of prime concern, for they are everything that McArthur identifies as nasty and Celtic. One is merely a big oaf who doesn't say much (Donal McCann), and the other, the proverbial brains of the operation, comes across as a very crude tough guy type (Niall Toibin). Both are living on the fringes of this already marginalized society, and both are on the dole. They are, in short, a pair of no good bums. And yet, they are the two characters that Quinn spends the most time with, not the eccentric distiller. He forces his viewer to come to terms with their need to identify with characters that fit Bourgeois norms by giving us anti-heroes that defy such norms in a loud, sometimes (self)destructive way. Quinn, through these two outcasts, shatters the stereo-

types of the rugged men of nature struggling to forge a place for themselves along the rugged coastline. He insists that they be seen as products of a culture that is brutal and impoverished, which, as Rockett points out, is comparable to an urban existence (129).

Most important in the anti-romantic perspective that Quinn adopts here is the way that he shows Western life to be defined by frustration. The selling agents have their valuable poitin stolen by corrupt police officers, but even when they steal it back they find they still aren't satisfied. The scene where the selling agents arrive to terrorize the Poitin maker is really the harshest indicator of this kind of perpetual frustration: they flail about aimlessly and destructively, yelling for more poitin, which the distiller insists he doesn't have. This comes to an (anti)climax when Toibin tries to rape the daughter: his attempt ends in impotent failure. The one thing that McCann loves, his dog, ends up getting killed by the distiller, and he discovers the body in the final scene, as they are sinking in the boat. Life in this harsh rural environment is shown to be a constant struggle for only minimal payoff: the hope of living to get drunk another day. In the end, even this goal is frustrated.

The film does, however, strike a blow for Irish nationalism in the way that Quinn insists on privileging the perspective of the marginalized, all in the name of showing us what it's like to live in "the real Ireland," which is how he identifies the Western Shore. Again, a critique of modernity is implicit: it is the police, the only representatives of "respectable" society in the entire film, who initiate all this trouble. It ends up that the poitin maker has his own mechanisms to deal with these treacherous employees, and this eventually works quite well. The society that Quinn evokes is harsh and frequently violent, but it a distinct, fully functioning one not recognizing the laws of "civilized" Ireland. However, Martin McCloone ironically notes that "Poitin offers a deliberately unromantic view of the west of Ireland which, in cultural nationalism, was the repository of all those Gaelic, rural values which were to be the basis of Ireland's anti-modernist utopia" (159). Quinn certainly repudiates the romanticism attached to those "Gaelic, rural values," but what this film is about is the recognition that such values exist and continue to exist, just not in the way imagined by mainstream representation. The film certainly does not celebrate this rural way of life, but it does insist on the its accurate representation, and in so doing validates it in a way that no romantic tale of man against nature ever could.

Again, a correspondence with third cinema is quite evident. While the film's style is not as flamboyant and jarring as *Lament*, it does reject Hollywood norms through its heavy use of long takes and long shots coupled with zooms, and this striving for an alter-

native film practice, even on a basic aesthetic level, is part of the Third cinema manifesto. *Poitin* is not actively agitational, but its rejection of bourgeois norms of representation is just as oppositional as anything in *Lament*. The film is a tract on the autonomy of what is a third world country within industrialized Europe, and it is made in direct opposition to conventional modes of cinema, both narrative and visual.

ATLANTEAN

Quinn's most widely discussed documentary has been the three part work *Atlantean*, made for Irish state television. The film challenges the very notion of Celtic identity, arguing that the Irish are actually descended from sea faring peoples that also populate North Africa. The film once again rejects "respectable," Aryan notions of Irish identity, in favor of a nationalist vision that validates the lives of those who work close to, and work hard on, the Irish land.

Three examples that Quinn offers of overlap between Irish and Middle Eastern culture are particularly instructive. The first is that of music, or "spoken song," which has been a key part of the culture of both Ireland and the Middle East (Morocco and Egypt are his primary examples). One sequence features Quinn cross cutting between a man singing an extremely old Irish song in Gaelic and a Moroccan man singing in Arabic, with remarkable similarity in both tempo and tone. Both styles of music, it seems, are called 'speaking songs" in their respective languages. The second example that Quinn uses is of sails: a certain kind of two piece sail has for hundreds of years been the standard for fishing villages on the western shore, and the same design is found in coastal villages throughout Northern Africa. He also finds commonalities between Arabic and Gaelic, far more, he argues, than exist between Gaelic and English. While many museum experts and academics are consulted, these sorts of reference points center the investigations firmly within coastal, rural life. Indeed, his entire argument centers on the notion that small ships served to link Africa and Ireland, which are actually not that far apart by seafaring standards and whose main coastal towns spring up along points that would have been logical trading centers between the two continents.

Quinn at one point admits that he never would have thought such links to be a real possibility, but this was because he had a "colonized mind." In another sequence, where he is traipsing about in Morocco, he observes that everyone here speaks French and Arabic, in much the same way that everyone in the west speaks both Gaelic and English. In each place, the indigenous population has been forced to adopt the language of the colonizer. It is this common concern that informs the entire film, a quest to bring out Ireland and the Middle East's common heritage of struggle and rebellion, each



one forged in the hope that the people who live there might be able to return to a way of life other than what is forced on them by powers outside their culture. The nationalist aspirations are more pronounced in this film than in any other of the films under discussion except for perhaps Lament. The irony of this is that this nationalism is brought out through a quite radical challenge to the very essence of the national identity. It is a common heritage of work and struggle within the confines of rural life that Quinn advocated though his vision of nationalism, however, and it is a vision quite consistent with the perspective of his other films. It carries on his project of eradicating the identity forced upon rural people by those in positions of usually illegitimate authority, a classic anti-colonialist mission.

The film is made with many standard documentary techniques, but Quinn is a constant presence and this helps to undermine any notions of anthropological "objectivity." He narrates the film, from a first person perspective, he is seen in a good chunk of it, and he constantly questions his own conclusions, frequently noting how he had originally dismissed them as "eccentric" or "foolish." Like *Lament*, *Atlantean*

invites active engagement on the part of the viewer through Quinn's professed self-doubt, and works through a structure that is essentially anti-illusionistic. As a result, *Atlantean* is not the last word on the origin of Irish culture, nor does it strive to be. Rather, its most important facet is that it adds another word. Quinn, through this film, looks to upset accepted notions of Ireland's place in European identity, striving to steer away from conventional, Aryan notions of culture more palatable to respectable society.

Again, a critique of modernity is what helps to give this film much of its bite. It was broadcast not long after Ireland had been voted into the European Union, a historical event that served to usher in what was thought of as "the new Ireland." Seen in this context the film is clearly a reaction against this wave of cosmopolitanism. Rather than seeking an internationalism based on mutual economic enrichment, Quinn here argues for an internationalism based on shared struggle, not only against colonialism but also against the brutalities of coastal life. Quinn once said that he made films for those "isolated by its language... from the American-English world" (cited in Rockett, 137). Those are who this reading of history is for as well. It seeks to answer this isolation not by begging for its eradication (and for the gentrification of coastal culture) but by creating a viable alternative, viable from both a scientific and political perspective.

THE BISHOP'S STORY

Quinn's most recent film is also his most ambitious, released in 35mm and playing in many film festivals and cinematheques. Following the story of a Bishop who violates the laws of the Catholic church, *The Bishop's Story* takes place in a small village on Clare island, and Quinn again shows the West to be harsh and impoverished, but nonetheless a place where a fully autonomous culture is surviving. The film is also anti-authoritarian, but in a more subtle,

sadder way than Quinn's fiery, earlier work. The film is visually innovative, although its minimalist style is the polar opposite of the frenzied *Lament* of twenty years earlier. *The Bishop's Story* is much quieter than Quinn's earlier work, although it displays all the same commitments.

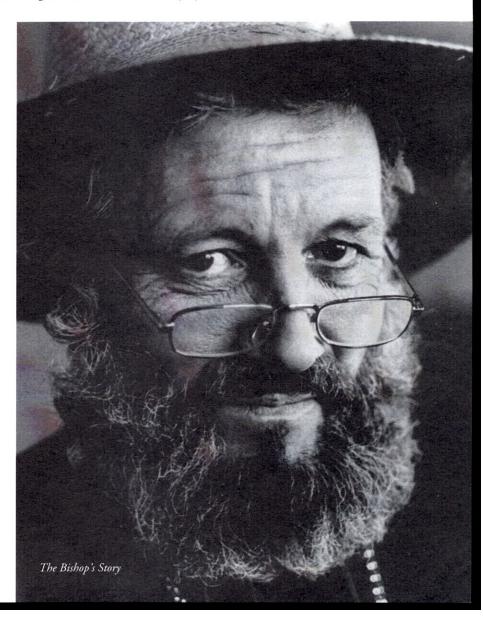
The film opens with two men, one an old Bishop and the other a middle aged priest, in a drying out house for alcoholic clerics. As the two men get to talking, the Bishop tells the story of a "minor indiscretion," one that he says happened so long ago that it's hard to consider it very important. The narrative then flashes back some twenty years, when the Bishop, then a priest assigned to a small village in the Islands, assumes his new post. But a troubled woman with whom he was once in love makes her way to the island, and he allows her to live with him as his house-keeper. The respectability of this relationship is shattered when they sleep together during a stormy night. She becomes pregnant, and although he at first tries to hide their relationship, he clearly has no intention of forsaking the woman, so eventually comes out with it. Naturally, the Church authorities are appalled.

The culture of the Clare island village is evoked in a way that is again anti-romantic, but which nonetheless pays respect to the powerfully coherent community that has been formed here. The villagers, most of them fisherman, are clearly very poor, and the village itself has very little development. When one of the parishioners is giving birth, the bishop chats with her husband, who notes that without kids, there's no future, but that there doesn't seem to be any future for them here. Indeed, this is an island stuck in the past, although no real effort, or any desire, to jump into modernity is ever enunciated. Like in *Poitin*, the island clearly has its own codes of behavior and its ways of punishing those who defy them, as illustrated by the death of the man who rats out the Bishop. Furthermore, the real moment of realization that the Bishop is "living in sin" comes when the village's population is gathered at a pub for a dance, and the Bishop puts his arm around the woman, telling her that "it's wrong to lie to people like this." He here opens himself up for judgement by the collective, his confessional sermon the next morning serving almost as an afterthought to this. The Bishop, himself a figure endowed with authority by conventional structures, here knows

the absolute necessity of submitting himself to the will of his community. This village is a fully functioning, self governing collective.

The life that Quinn evokes here is one of perpetual struggle, and his characters are the same downtrodden rural proletarians that we saw in *Poitin*. As in that film, Quinn does his best to respect both the harshness of the land and the harshness of the people who continue to work it. While the dysfunction of their lives is not laid as bare as it was in the earlier film, the harshness of their life is one of the film's crucial elements, making the Bishop's fall from grace at the hands of Galway-based outsiders (the church officials) all the more blasphemous.

The film's distrust of authority figures, then, is certainly linked to the advocacy for a rural existence. When the priest comes clean, the villagers themselves are less than appalled, and it is only when one of them spitefully spills the beans to the powers that be that there is any problem. Quinn, who had already strove to revise Irish religion in *Atlantean*, clearly has problems with the authoritarian nature of the church, framing it as a kind of colonization from within. He writes in *Film Ireland* that the novel upon



which *The Bishop's Story* is based "appealed to me because it revealed a unique tolerance towards sexual peccadilloes that I had long discovered existed in Connamara and which survived in no other community in this theocratic state" From a former Official this hostility is not surprising, and Purdie notes that "the main barrier to socialist ideas in Ireland was the Catholic Church" (88). The villagers adhere to the church in that they attend mass, etc., but Quinn shows that they have a certain attachment to occult religions, based no doubt in the Gnostic Christianity that he suggested in *Atlantean* was at the heart of Irish religion.

The most heartbreaking aspect of this anti-authoritarianism is in the scenes in the clergy rest home. The now aged and bitter bishop cynically tells his young companion that faith is not something that a man of his position could afford, and that this is common knowledge among clerics of any influence. Quinn shows this man, in fine anti-romantic fashion, as hardened by the forces he's tried to serve, and ultimately broken by this theocratic/bureaucratic complex that is the Catholic Church. These are quiet and understated scenes, and their impact is shattering.

Visually the film is striking not only for its minimalist black and white photography but for its use of silent film style intertitles to translate the Gaelic dialogue. Long takes and long shots prevail, but unlike Poitin there is not a lot of camera movement, and Quinn's compositions are most often spare and highcontrast. The film's pictorial grace and apparent artificiality, constantly re-enforced by the title cards, again brings the film into the realm of the anti-illusionistic. Ouinn this time is calling attention to the illusion itself, inviting his viewers to take pleasure in it but reminding them that this is only a movie (and a silent movie at that!). The minimalist editing and composition is certainly meant as a visual antecedent to the lives of the villagers, again an answer to the sugar coating that Hollywood so often practices when photographing the Irish landscape. It is certainly ironic this revision is realized through the resurrection of classical film conventions, but the impulse to go back to a technologically primitive cinema aesthetic is yet another manifestation of Quinn's skepticism towards modernity, and a way of paying deference in representing a community still very much stuck in the past.

The film, then emerges as the culmination of Quinn's ongoing concerns: representation of the west, the oppression of "cultured" authority and the proletarian struggle against it, and an interest in alternatives to a conventional narrative form.

BOB QUINN: THE THIRD MAN

These concerns fit nicely within the purview of impulses lumped under the rubicon of "Third Cinema"

by various critics. Solonas and Gettino pinpoint the overall mission of Third Cinema as simply "the decolonization of culture," and this is what all of Quinn's ongoing projects can be boiled down to, from the rejection of literal colonialism in Lament to the rejection of colonial viewpoint that has dominated representations of the West. His work is really quite a full realization of the "Poor Celtic Cinema" proposed by McCabe, itself a model steeped in the rhetoric of Third cinema. Ireland occupies an awkward place in Europe, and the west occupies an awkward place within Ireland. Quinn's work has always advocated for the perspective of the proletarian oppressed, in various incarnations, and he has very much helped to keep alive a tradition of progressive Feinism that threatens to vanish under Sinn Fein's current incarnation. Quinn has distinguished himself as the voice of the dispossessed, and in enunciating the concerns of "the real Ireland," he has assured himself a place in annals of populist filmmaking.

Lament for Art O'Leary is held at the Irish Film Archive, Dublin. Poitin is distributed by the Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Library. 11 West 53 Street. New York NY 10019, USA. The Bishop's Story is distributed by the Irish Film Institute. 6 Eustace Street, Temple Bar. Dublin 2, Ireland.

Thanks to John Buckley, head of the Irish American Cultural Institute, Philadelphia: Gretjen Clausing, Assistant Director, Neighborhood Film/Video Project, Philadelphia: Kathleen Murphy, curator of the Irish Film Festival for the Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York; and Sunniva O'Flynn, Curator, Irish Film Archive, Dublin. Thanks also to Mark Miller, Colorado Springs, for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

Works Cited:

Gettino, Octavio and Fernando Solanas. "Towards a Third Cinema." In Bill Nichols, ed. *Movies and Methods*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California Press, 1976. 44-64.

McArthur, Colin. "The Cultural Necessity of a Poor Celtic Cinema." In John Hill, Martin McCloone and Paul Hainsworths, eds. Border Crossing: Film In Ireland, Britain and Europe. Belfast: Institute for Irish Studies and London: British Film Institute, 1994. 112-125.

McCloone, Martin. "National Cinema and Cultural Identity: Ireland and Europe." In McCloone et al, 146-173.

Murphy, Patsy. Introduction to Galway Film Fledh's Bob Quinn Retrospective. Galway: Galway Film Fledh, 1993.

Purdie, Bob. "Reconsideration on Republicanism and Socialism." In Austen Morgan and Purdie, eds. *Ireland: Divided Nation, Divided Class.* London: Ink Links, 1980. 74-95.

Quinn, Bob. "What Happened to the Bishop?" Film Ireland, #39 8-12

Rockett, Kevin. "Breakthroughs." In Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, eds. *Cinema and Ireland*. Syracuse: Syracuse U Press, 1988. 127-144.

by Marcy Goldberg &Firoza Elavia

An Interview with Ali Kazimi



"It is an eternal struggle between the Need and the Greed. In Gujarat I see that Greed has the upper hand." - Baba Amte

li Kazimi, director of *Narmada, A Valley Rises*, was born in Hyderabad, India, in 1961. Educated in Delhi at St. Stephen's College, he immigrated to Canada in 1983. He received his B.F.A in Film and Video from York University and has worked as a cinematographer, associate producer, and still photographer. *Narmada* is his first feature-length documentary. Kazimi began shooting in India in 1990 but did not receive funds to complete the project until 1993.

Dedicated "to those who have paid the price of progress," the film documents the struggle waged by the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Movement) against the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project. The dam, which was initially funded in part by the World Bank, will flood one of Asia's most fertile river valleys and leave homeless 160,000 tribal and rural people, in order to provide water and electricity for urban dwellers, industry, and lucrative agricultural crops such as cotton and tobacco. The film focuses on a 200 kilometer march by 6,000 people, mainly tribal and rural dwellers, through the valleys to be submerged. Starting at Rajgaht, Madhya Pradesh, the march was to have reached the site of the dam at Ferkuva, in Gujarat. Confronted at the Gujarat state border by police and pro-dam supporters, a tense stand-off develops in spite of the marchers' non-violent tactics.

The march's 76-year-old moral and spiritual leader, Baba Amte, calls for negotiations with the Indian Government, to no avail. Grassroots organizer Medha Patkar and 6 other activists go on an indefinite fast, in the tradition of Gandhian non-violent resistance. After 22 days, national and international protest stirred up by the fast results in an independent review of the project, which leads to the World Bank's withdrawal of direct funding. The dam is still being built, but the struggle continues, as the film ends with updated scenes of peaceful resistance by villagers.



Narmada premiered as a Perspective Canada entry at the 1994 Toronto Film Festival. It received Canadian National Documentary awards for Best Director and Best Political Documentary, and a special mention for Best Film. It has also received the Golden Gate award at the San Francisco International Film Festival. The film has screened internationally, including in India, where a Hindi version is currently being produced. In Canada it has been broadcast on Vision TV, and has been bought by CBC's "Newsworld". Narmada is available in Canada from Peripheral Visions Film and Video Inc, Toronto, Ontario. Foreign sales agent: Great North Releasing Inc., Edmonton, Alberta.

F: It has taken you several years to produce Narmada. What obstacles did you face in making the film?

A: There are two things, one is this issue of being a filmmaker of colour, and I think that's in addition to the enormous difficulties all documentary filmmakers face. Basically there's very little funding for documentaries. It has been relegated to a second-class status in terms of the glory and glamour of feature filmmaking. That's the attitude that funding agencies take as well. Documentary filmmakers face these enormous hurdles to begin with. It's hard enough to make it, and I respect anyone who makes a film because I know the kind of process that they've gone through, the kind of agony and frustration and moments of despair. As a person of colour you are always accutely aware of a sense of racism. You can't get away from it, it's a reality that one has to live with in Canada. It never manifested itself as an overt process, ever - it's always very subtle but you immediately sense it.

The initial funding came out of my own pocket because there was just no time to approach the agencies. But when I came back after the initial shoot, I started doing the rounds: OFDC Non-Theatrical Film Fund, Canadian Independent Film and Video fund, the arts councils - I hadn't really approached them for my project before so as far as all these people were concerned, I was a first-time applicant.

I remember having a discussion with somebody at one of the funders, and they said, "We can't fund this because it's not a Canadian project. It's got everything to do with India. It's got no Canadian content." So I said "Well, that's odd because that hasn't stopped Canadian filmmakers from making films before. I see that films on Haiti and Israel and Ethiopia which have nothing directly to do with Canada have been funded and continue to be funded, so what's the problem?" I believe these films are Canadian as far as I'm concerned, because first of all they're made by Canadian filmmakers, Canadian crews, all their postproduction is done here and they are using a Canadian frame of reference, a Canadian world view on a particular situation in other countries and bringing it back to a Canadian audience. So in that sense they are Canadian films. Finally out of sheer frustration I said, "The only problem that I see is that the filmmakers who made the other films were white and I'm not and also I happen to be



an immigrant. Is that the thing that differentiates this from everything else?". "No! that's not a problem. Have you tried for funding in India?" And the question about funding in India is an interesting question to me because what it immediately does is in a sense it questions the whole notion of whether this is a Canadian work or not.

I got turned down 3 times by the Canada Council and I got turned down once by the Ontario Arts Council and I think twice by the OFDC non-theatrical fund, all the times by the Independent Film and Video fund, and most, in fact all, broadcasters. I still have a file of rejection letters that I keep just to remind myself of that.

F: Basically for the reasons that you already said?

A: No, I think I have to clarify that, because the reasons around this not being a Canadian production happened in one case. I think that it would be unfair for me to generalize that to everything. But that was such a dramatically obvious example and I do believe that at times there was that undercurrent - sometimes. Again, as I said, nothing is overt, it's the subtext that one learns to read, and becomes very good at. (laughter). And everyone looks at you and says "What, you're just paranoid". Well, it's a healthy dose of paranoia. For example, the Canada Council gave some of the oddest reasons. At one point the jury felt that from my support work they could see that I was a good cinematographer but I couldn't do this as a director, and that perhaps I should work with Indian filmmakers. They also said that things like these have been done a million times before and that this is nothing new, it's all been taken care of. At times I was told that for educational purposes that this would be of no use, because it will have too many subtitles and people would have a really hard time understanding Indian accents. There were a whole bunch of reasons. At times you feel this enormous amount of rage because it's a level of patronizing, you're constantly being talked down to - and what makes it frightening is these people have got the power to make your film a reality or not in an economic sense.

M: How did you respond to the agency which rejected your work as not being "Canadian enough"?

A: I sent them a four page letter and I outlined various other artists that they had funded whose work had dealt with particular geographical regions and cultures outside Canada, but who were known as Canadian artists. I said, here are artists your department has funded whose works are based outside Canada, the whole narrative takes place outside, it has nothing to do with Canada in particular, but yet they're recognized all around the world as Canadians and they have brought fame and glory to the country. They wrote back to me, I'll paraphrase but I still have the letters with me, "Well Mr. Kazimi, we argue that making a work of art such as the works you have referred to is an entirely different matter from making a documentary about a social and political movement." Yet in this country we claim that

there is no political censorship. Sure, nobody is saying that they're censoring anything, but the process still remains the same and the impact remains the same. And there was essentially nothing I could do about it.

And they also denied the fact that this was a peer review. They said that these are peers who are brought in as expert advisors, "but their role is merely an advisory role and we make the ultimate decision." Of course, people have argued over the years that in fighting systemic problems one of the key things is the selection of peer reviewers. I really believe in spite of systemic flaws, that the fundamental principle of peer assessment of your project and the ability to make a project with complete editorial control is an extremely critical principle. So this response totally negates the process and respect for the peer reviewers.

One thing with the Canada Council was that, because this was being shot on video it was going to a video jury. Video juries tend to be focused more on video art and this was a straight documentary. For the arts council this was too traditional, this was a straightforward work. But I kept arguing that by implying it was traditional it was a very superficial reading of what the film was about, because it negated my position as a filmmaker of colour, as someone who has also moved to Canada and is going back and taking this approach. It negated my voice in the film - this wasn't the voice of God, it was me, and I certainly wasn't claiming to be God.

M: How did you finally succeed in getting Telefilm and the Art Councils and OFDC and so on to fund your project?

A: I think that how things started really changing was that I became frustrated. I wrote dozens of variations of my proposal and I came to the conclusion that either my proposal writing was getting too stale or just losing its passion in all the rewrites I was doing. And my friend and editor who finally edited the film, Steve Weslak, came and looked at the material and he felt it was strong. I think the other thing to really keep in mind for filmmakers is to have friends and peers that you respect whose feedback you can trust because there are moments where you will lose sight of your work. After receiving a number of turn-downs and responses like the ones I've outlined it's sometimes easy to lose perspective on your own work. Steve believed that the work was good but that perhaps it was too abstract being written on paper. So he advised me to invest more money into it and do a short promo which would give people a sense of the production values and the kind of quality of the material and the story, and give a real visual [sense]. So I spent a fair amount of money and made a 15-minute production which was a fullblown production basically, with music and full mix and subtitles and everything in it. I did a full on-line of it and a proper jacket cover and the works, just like a mini-production, and then sent that around to the councils and Telefilm, and that's when things started changing.

M: What were your concerns in editing the film, and how did you work with your editor, Steve Weslak?

A: We had to make decisions very very fast, because 13 weeks is not a long time to cut a film of this length. The thing that we had going for us was that it was in chronological order and there was a chronological thread to it, so there wasn't a question of juggling around huge chunks, as it happens in many documentaries. There were a few sections that we could juggle around a bit, but not too many. We had to stay within the chronological order, and that was a big bonus.

Now the other thing that we discussed right from the beginning was whether or not we were going to construct this film with narration or without, because that would affect the approach we would take. In spite of the kind of trends in documentary filmmaking, the kind of fashions these days where narration is seen as old-fashioned and traditional, I've always felt that narration was very very important, for me, especially in a film like this where I was trying to bridge two cultures that I knew and lived in. It was always difficult for me to see films about India that were done without narration, because the readings of them were invariably incomplete and superficial. I wanted the narration to work more as a guide and to act as a friend, communicating a context for the audience within which they could understand a lot of other things. There's a lot of subtext in the film, there are a lot of subtle moments that the audience still picks up on invariably without being told. Ultimately when you are constructing a film without narration it is still a construction, we cannot get away from it, you cannot delude yourself into thinking that by seamlessly integrating interviews you are not doing a construction...

Also I thought it was really important for the film to have a point of view. I believe that the narration defines the point of view the film takes and the voice of the film becomes the narration. So once that was sorted out, it became quite easy for us. We knew that there were moments here that needed explanation. The commissioner for example was talking about the villages that are going to be submerged. So we said, we need narration, to set up the context about what's happening there before: is this an isolated incident or is there a history behind this?

M: You mentioned before that the arts councils tended to see the film as a 'traditional' documentary which is supposedly distinct from 'art'. How would you characterize the style of the film, and relate that to choices that you made in terms of presenting the subject matter?

A: I think it's a big struggle because there's a trend in the alternative documentary scene to make a lot of selfreflexive work that puts the filmmaker within the form of the film and within the [subject] matter of the film. There's also a lot of filmmaking around personal histories and personal relationships with the subjects and certainly that's the kind of work that is seen as at the cutting edge, if you will, of film and video production. I keep calling it a film because I think although the medium is video, the techniques, and as far as I'm concerned the aesthetic and the shooting style remains fundamentally a filmic one. The problem was and still is that a lot of filmmakers who do other kinds of work say, "Well, that was a very good traditional documentary" and it's always said in the sense of very traditional work, you know, "that was good television." And I feel frustrated by it at times because it is not traditional, for many reasons. I mean, what to me, traditional documentary is, is something that's very didactic, it tells you what to think, it tells you what is happening on the screen, it has the so-called 'voice of God' narration, which usually has been traditionally a white male voice or imitations thereof, as in India we have the Film Division where everybody speaks with a British accent. That to me is a traditional documentary. And the way people are filmed, how they are filmed, and who gets to speak on the screen, and for how long, what kind of people are filmed. Those to me define the notion of the traditional, and here's a film that has been made by a filmmaker who is from India, has lived in Canada for 12 years, is going back to India to make this film in which the voice is the filmmaker's voice. It is superficially a narrative form of documentary filmmaking but it also has elements of cinéma vérité in it, it has people speaking in their own voices. These are small things, but they require just a little bit more than a superficial dismissal of the film as being traditional. Because if that's purely based on form, then you're completely denying the history and the context within which documentary filmmaking has evolved and has emerged, because tradition implies a certain history and positioning in a historical moment.

The other thing was that in terms of form, I wanted to be very careful about not imposing a form on the subject. I really wanted to do things in an interesting way but not to disrespect my subjects, and I felt that if I was to impose a form onto a movement that was so incredibly sincere and motivated where it was truly a question of life and death, for me to impose my artistic vision of it would be incredibly disrespectful and I just couldn't do that. I also didn't want to include my own story or to make it self-reflexive in a way because I was not the focus of the film. The "I" is there, because I also chose, for several reasons, to put

myself at the beginning of the film where I say that I returned to India. So the voice has a position: the voice is located in a geographic and historical space and in a cultural space. I just thought that that declaration of locating myself when I say, "seven years after moving to Canada I returned to India where I was born" to document the turning point in the struggle, that was the only point where I draw attention to myself. There's another point but it's not in the first person, where I talk about the police, that the police struck at night but "are surprised by the presence of cameras" - that's the second time that the attention is drawn to myself. Both moments are different in a way, but the first time I say it I wanted to say that - Steve for example disagreed with me, he said it was weird - I thought it was important for several reasons because I didn't want this film to be seen in India for example as an Indian film, which would have been blatantly dishonest, because it wasn't . I also didn't want this film to be seen here and dismissed as an Indian film. I wanted people to be really aware of where I was and I believe that saying that immediately allows people to develop a different framework . It may be subtle, it may be obvious, but for me it was really important to let my audience know where I was and who I was.

There is a moment in the film where I do play around with form a little bit. We did this impressionistic montage of bare feet intercut with police preparations and it has a kind of impressionistic soundtrack. That whole montage, people remember the shots and I flinch sometimes when I hear that because they say, that's a great shot, the slow-motion shot of those feet. But it's also interesting that that montage comes after a very emotional scene of Medha and Baba chanting slogans where 5000 peple have just met, it's a great moment of euphoria, and I felt that montage worked for me at that point because it allowed a kind of emotional overtone to flow and mix with things. But I couldn't do that every time.

Often the stories of producing a film are stranger than what is being filmed. There was a point where, for example, my crew and I got arrested. I remember writing a draft of part of the script in the first person [saying] that, this is what happened to us, and it suddenly became so self-indulgent, for me. I still have it, and I look at it and I go, this would have been a total disaster, because it immediately drew attention to myself and my plight as the filmmaker. That is the way I felt at that point - that in the larger context this was such a minuscule event that happened to me, which paled in significance compared to the enormous amount of repression and violence and threat and fear that the people had been facing for so many years. To draw attention to myself in that sense would have been totally inappropriate.

F: In seeking alternatives to mainstream narrative representation, the emphasis is often on attempts to develop a new visual language. What do you think of this notion of 'new ways of seeing'?

A: But you see, with this whole fetish of newness, I feel the perspective is lost. New as compared to what? If you don't have a historical context to compare your work to, if you don't know where your work comes out of, or the kind of documentary practice your work comes out of, so what is new? A lot of artists that say they're doing new work, but if you look at the classic films, they are doing similar stuff. It's perceived as being new, but it's not really new. It's within the historical context, it has been experimented with and done, in the early part of cinema. When I say my work is new, it is new because of who I am, and my perspective. When the film was screened in India several people said that there is an underlying sense of the cultural ethos that prevails through the whole film and it's there in small moments, and they point out small moments to me that for them signify that. And I think that is new, for me that is where the newness lies, because it differentiates it from something that is either done for television or is quote unquote a straight documentary. So I feel a great deal of frustration when there is this focus on the newness of form. For me, it's like stamping this big "new" sign on a box of detergent and saying 'new'. I mean, everything is new, but new in relationship to what?

M: If there is something 'new' about your film, it's the kind of representation of the people involved in the struggle. For instance, the talking head shots of the tribal people, who are the first participants you show after you have introduced yourself. Here the use of talking head shots is not unimaginative - it's empowering in a straightforward way. This doesn't come across as an attempt to be 'transparent' or conventional - it seems more like an appropriate form for the subject matter.

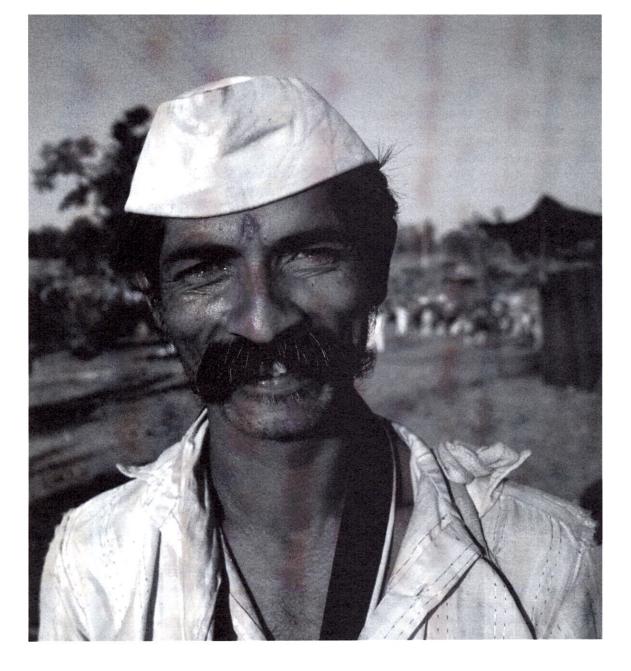
A: This comes as an enormous relief to me because that was exactly the intent and that was exactly what I was doing. Tom Waugh had written a piece in Cineaction on the documentary a few years ago, and one of the things he'd [talked about] in it was the dominance of the talking group shot in Indian cinema. His argument in this article - which I'd read just before going to do the shoot, and in a sense it motivated me, because it did upset me - his argument was that the one-to-one interview comes out of a very Western notion of the confessional and that one-to-one discussions in collectivized societies and cultures like India were uncommon. And it would take an extremely talented director to draw out of ordinary Indians how they really felt. And therefore he concluded the lack of single one-toone interviews. I was outraged. And I felt that, ok I

will do one-to-one interviews with people who are ostensibly the most disempowered, the most unprivileged, the most oppressed people in India, and see how it works. And that's why I did all the interviews [that way]. I wanted to interview all the people, both the tribal and the rural people in a straightforward way, giving them the same kind of respect and screen space and angles and positioning that is given to the so-called 'experts' in documentaries. It was a very clearly thought out process that I wanted to use.

F: As the filmmaker, a power imbalance could emerge between yourself and the tribal and rural subjects. How did you work around this issue?

A: There is a power relationship everywhere: as a filmmaker, living in the so-called First World, certainly I acknowledge my power, and the other thing I wanted to do by positioning myself as living in Canada was to acknowledge my own position of privilege. The positioning was very simple for me: that my voice would never speak for them or never even condense what they had to say. It would provide a context for their interviews, within which their interviews could be read and positioned. So, in the beginning I say, I talk about the Gayana, the creation myth of the Bhilalas. One of the notes people perhaps miss is that what is going on on the soundtrack at the back is the Gayana that is being sung. Then the first interview comes on and she says something very simple, but for me it's very very significant because she says, "We gather everything from the forest and we don't work for anybody." And that we don't work for anybody is such an important statement for me because it implies a self-reliance, it implies a great deal of pride, not just a certain amount, and a lack of feeling subservient. And so immediately for me the selection of those clips becomes very important in terms of the kind of self-confidence and power that is expressed.

The Nature of Things covered the same story, and what was very interesting to me was that the voices of the people were dubbed, using South Asian actors from Toronto, who were asked, must have been directed because I know some of them and none of them speak with that kind of accent - to speak in this incredibly hideous Peter Sellers kind of accent. And they did it to the point where state names, like Maharashtra and Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh were westernized in their pronunciation. As a filmmaker you're working within these codes or representation and codes of filmmaking which people recognize. Are you going to look down on people, and point the camera down at them, or are you going to shoot at eye level, or shoot them from below? I would never ever look down on people through my camera, that's something that I'm extremely conscious of when shooting. But on The Nature of Things a lot of



interviews were shot looking down on people: people would be sitting while the cameraperson would be standing, and you're looking down on them. And those are very subtle modes of representation, but at some level there's an implication there: of victimhood.

Part of my motivation for doing the film was also the notion of the victimization of Third World peoples, both by the media and by audiences; that people are not shown as having the strength or the ability to not just confront but even to understand what is happening to them. I wanted to be very conscious of the fact that the kind of clips that I was using, by virtue of the fact of what they were saying, gave those people a certain amount of power. Also, one of the things that I felt happens often, in the construction of the 'other' - there's a film called *Deadly Currents* which Steve edited - what struck me in that film, and in a number of other films too, is that when people were chanting slogans it was never translated. And the justification is, well, you know what they're saying, because you have the sort of visual context, so the people were angry and raising their fists and shouting, they are showing that they are upset with something. But that's not good enough. You are negating the power of the moment by not allowing access - and therefore context - to what is being said. I wanted to make sure that every time there was any chanting of slogans on the screen or any singing that it was all translated.

F: Chanting and singing are an important element of your film. What are the implications of this mode of communication? **A:** It's part of the cultural ethos. Some people have said that I haven't allowed enough voice of the people to come

through. I think it's very presumptuous to think that people only express themselves through interviews. To me, the slogan "the dam will not be built, no one will move" is a collective slogan. It expresses a lot. And if you see for yourself that that's what people are saying. Songs have such a cultural context, because within tribal and rural cultures in India oral histories are preserved through songs. Singing is not just a way of empowering oneself, but also of preserving history, and moments in history, and political positions, and feelings and emotions of a particular type, so all the songs that are used in the film come from, represent, the voice of the people. So for me they were not just melodic pieces, mood pieces, they were not just part of world music. They are more than that, they are political statements: they represent a certain passion and voice that perhaps could not be articulated in that way in interviews.

M: One thing that really strikes me about the political situation documented in the film is the way that the language and tactics of the Gandhian movement have been appropriated and distorted by the pro-dam people; for instance, Gandhi's favorite devotional song is twisted by Mrs. Patel into an attack on Baba Amte. Would you like to comment on that?

A: Well yeah, I think it's interesting because one of the things you have to understand is that there isn't a Gandhian philosophy. One of the distinguishing features of the man was that he did not leave behind a very specifically laid-out ideology. Certainly there was an emphasis on non-violence and he accepted the limitations of his own policy, his own doctrine of non-violence. So that what the movement has done is take certain aspects of his overall approach to mass political action and one of them is non-violence. And then there are other parts of Gandhism which the other side has taken which is the whole spiritual side. The whole spiritual religious side of Gandhi hasn't been part of the [Narmada protest] movement. Then you see, the pro-dam side, led by Mrs. Urmila Patel, completely bastardizing his favorite hymn - for Indians who see that, they're completely horrified at how could this possibly be done, in a very shameless manner. I think this notion of two sides using the same kind of philosophy to outdo each other was a very interesting and complex situation. And I think by doing that they put themselves on the same field and therefore the differences that were inherent in them could emerge more clearly. In a sense that was fortunate, because the differences in language and action and motivations could just come to the forefront without me really saying anything in terms of the narration. I didn't really have to work hard to draw attention to what was really happening. People could see for themselves that both sides are being non-violent and professing to adopt the same strategies. So then what are the moral differences? It's interesting, because non-violence is all about moral values and ethics and principles.

What was interesting was the very Machiavellian approach of the government: the whole thing was to try to outdo each other. I have to explain the broader context in which this march was taking place because what had happened was, in the broader political scene in India at that point there had been the initial attack on the mosque in Ayodhya that same fall. The government at that point had opened fire on the Hindu fundamentalists who were trying to bring the mosque down and I think 50-odd people had been killed. The government of Gujarat at that point was not therefore willing to be seen as using violence, so there was this whole façade of non-violence.

M: Your film raises the question of how to present collective action without denying the subjectivity and agency of the people involved. How did you negotiate the balance between collective and individual action, without either turning the people into a 'mass' or resorting to a myth of individual heroes?

A: I have been challenged in India, and here as well, by people who believe in this notion that everything comes out of collective action, and that focus on the leadership is doing a disservice to collective action. I believe that's somewhat of a mythical view, and that's the only word I can use. It was a minefield, there's no other way of describing it, because, how does one present leadership versus collective action, how decisions are made collectively versus leadership roles? Now I in no way wanted to present the Narmada movement as this ultimate movement of collective action or to romanticize it in any way. There are problems in it, and I wanted people to be able to read that in the film without making overt statements about it.

The positioning of both Medha Patkar and Baba Amte in the film was a very painful process. One of the things that we kept working on in the editing process, is that Medha comes in only about 7 or 8 minutes into the film. Her background is described, and Baba's background is described, and there are about 3 other activists, and there are a few lines describing their background. It was important for me to do that because there were sequences that happen later on in the film that needed explanation or context in terms of motivation: social status, public/media profile, of both Baba and Medha. Why was the government responding to Medha going on a fast, as opposed to just 7 people from the valley going on a fast? What would the difference have been? What was the significance, why was there

such a hue and cry about Baba collapsing and falling in one part of the film? As opposed to 6 activists being beaten up and taken away? I think what I represented was accurate from my subjective point of view, because Medha and Baba, in terms of all the press releases for example that were issued by the movement, have always been on the forefront. I believe that every movement has its own character, its own particular sense of history and in this particular movement, Medha is one of the leaders, Baba is there as a moral authority of the movement, and one cannot just deny that.

M: So this was accurately presenting the organization of the movement?

A: I believe so. But I think that's a reality, it's at times contradictory and paradoxical, but there it is. I've used some sequences in the film that allude to that power relationship, because I don't feel that it's all gone, I feel it still exists. One of my favorite scenes in the film is when this man comes in on a motorcycle and she is asking him to go and send a fax. The whole interaction, though she calls him brother, displays a certain power imbalance, and it's quite evident, certainly for anybody from the sub-continent, to see that. But I like that, I think it adds complexity and depth to the situation, rather than glossing over things.

M: Does Mehda's position as a woman affect her role as a leader? If so, how?

A: A lot of people have asked me this. I was talking to her about this just recently when I was in Nepal, and both she and Diane Reid, a Cree grassroots leader from James Bay, both said the same thing, in exactly the same way: that being women in a way works to their advantage because it gives them access to both men and women and that allows for them to reach a greater number of people. And therefore, used within that context or within that frame of reference it's a huge advantage. Both approach their position of being there in terms of their ability to mobilize - as using that advantage to reach across that gender gap. In terms of the men, one of the things that you have to understand is that - this is my reading of it - is that the issue of class is very important because Medha comes from, is perceived, as being definitely middle class urban, and therefore having this class privilege. Also being very highly educated, being a professor, all those are real signifiers of status and position and therefore respect. Being first of all a woman from the urban areas, she would not be treated in the same way as if she were from another village, say, or wouldn't be expected to behave as somebody from another village, and also someone who was educated, speaks English, is a professor - all that would give her a certain amount of inherent respect and allow the men to open up to her in a certain way.

F: How would you characterize Medha's function as activist, in relationship to the tribal people she works with? A: in some way I think she acts as a mediator between two worlds, between the urban and modern systems and the culture of the tribal and rural areas. But she does not speak for them. I think she's very careful - not just her but all the [non-tribal] activists are very careful - that people have to speak for themselves. People like Medha and Amit [Bhatnagar] speak for the larger context in terms of where they can articulate the philosophy, but if you speak for people all the time you certainly cannot mobilize people. But for example, there's a moment when she's talking to three men - they're having a strategy session about how to counteract the women police there - and I think the manner of the whole body language of the men and the way they're standing around her and listening to her, and her interaction, also has an undercurrent. It's a real great session where everyone is throwing in observations and ideas and something is coming out, it's one of my favorite moments, but there's a huge subtext to it rather than just what's being said.

F: A frequent problem in cross-cultural exchanges is that certain frameworks or cultural biases may be imposed on the subject matter from another culture. Have you encountered such problems?

A: I have, and I think it's interesting. Obviously there are many readings of the film, and I'm fascinated. I love getting responses to the film; as a filmmaker it only helps me grow. Sometimes people have read the film as starting off as a struggle for democratic rights and ultimately turning into this incredible force for women's rights. (laughs) I think, one cannot escape that in a way because every reading of the film is going to be very different. The way that I tried to keep the level of intellectualization, at least for the audience, to a minimum is to engage them emotionally as much as possible. You can look back in retrospect at an emotional experience and then go on to intellectualize it, but if you're intellectualizing as you're watching it in the process of it, then you're removing yourself from the narrative flow. The whole tradition of storytelling is important, not just culturally but everywhere. I think that's the most universal thing and therefore in terms of cross-cultural communication, the main mode of communication remains the story. And also, there was a lot of pressure on me at times, people would say, why don't you draw direct links with Canada and just say things about James Bay and all that, but I believe in this notion that if you make something very specific, the more universal it becomes. So the cultural specificity was really important. I see myself straddling two worlds and I tried to explain one to the other.

It's been an interesting process. It was agonizing at times to try and work through issues and be very careful about what was being communicated. And some people said to me, you are setting up all this context because you're making this film for a western audience. But when I showed the film in Delhi and Bombay it became very evident to me that it's not just for a western audience, I think it's for this 'global village' audience which is part of the First World, which is all plugged in and tuned in to modes of representation and uses the West as a frame of reference. Which is certainly the case of the elite in India, who needed as much context and information as the people here.

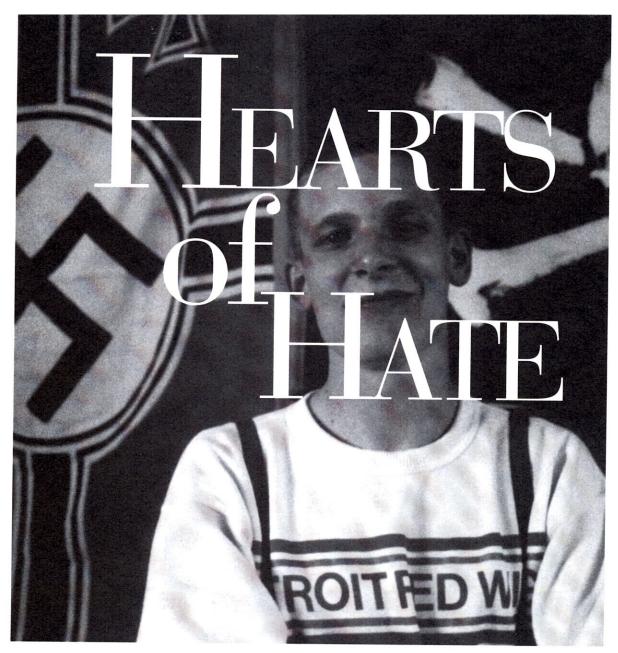
F: Functioning simultaneously as an 'insider' and an 'outsider', your positioning as filmmaker could be interpreted by some as that of an ethnographer. What is your response to such criticism?

A: I think that the notion of the ethnographic film, like the notion of the traditional documentary, has historical roots, and certainly the ethnographic film has been western filmmakers going to film or photograph the 'Other'. Now, the construction of the other is something that can really be broken down completely so that for somebody who lives in Regent Park, doing a film about Rosedale can be an ethnographic film. So, where do you draw the line? But I think that again, if one looks at it within a historical framework which has been predominantly of western white filmmakers going to the so-called Third World and making films about people - observational films, anthropological films, socalled cultural films, about lifestyle, about people - to me that is a more accurate representation of ethnographic films. Having said that, I think that when one goes to a different culture, and certainly when I go to a different culture, I cannot help recognizing certain parts of me and parts of my thinking that have been influenced by that process of observation, that have been influenced by looking at National Geographic. Because I think that there is an inherent purpose those films serve, and certainly they are not to be dismissed, but I think the change comes when you recognize it and are acutely aware of it - then I think that's the moment when you really start to work towards getting away from it. Some people have said to me that the opening of the film has got these ethnographic images of tribal people. Those images can be read as ethnographic images, or they can be read as moments in the lifestyle of a community.

M: Those images set up a context for the film, by showing the lifestyle that the dam will destroy. All the activities shown have to do with the river, and its importance in the everyday life of the people. A: The whole process of looking at documentary is not a serious process. I think for people who are interested... It all has to do with how documentary is looked at per se. And especially within a political context, certainly there's a push towards looking at documentary in terms of the cutting edge work that has to do with, again, self-reflexivity and subjectivity and the agency of the film-maker and filmmaking coming from a more theory-based aspect. I see a place for that, but as far as I'm concerned I want to communicate. I want to use what I have to tell a story and to share ideas and to reach out, therefore I want my films - to quote John Berger's view on language - to be as hospitable as possible, to allow people to enter worlds that I've presented for them.

M: Finally, what direction do you see for your future work? A: I certainly would like to continue making films on subjects which are close to my heart but I think it's becoming increasingly difficult in a climate that is so pervasively right wing and becoming even more so, coupled with this notion that the market rules supreme, that films like these and independent documentaries as a whole are being completely - funding for them and the whole support base for them is being whittled away. So however many problems I may have, systemic problems within organizations, within funding agencies, within institutions like the Film Board, I would certainly hate to see them diminished or destroyed. But it's becoming very difficult. It's not just funding agencies, it's also festivals and programmers who have consistently tended to shy away from 'political' work. There's this pervasive notion in filmmaking, and I think it's becoming even more so in documentary, that you cannot say anything political, that politics and art do not mix. And I've heard this several times, including being turned down by several festivals, where one of the feedbacks has been repeatedly the politics of it. Which is a sad commentary on not just the funding process but also the kind of films that are being screened and promoted and shown.

There are a couple of things I don't want to do in my filmmaking. I don't want to tie myself down to a particular style or limit myself to one particular subject. I feel that I want to try to push myself as much as possible. Again, it's tied to the subject matter that I choose - I want to maintain that sense of not imposing form onto content - but yet at the same time allowing myself to play with form. My next film is about a Mohawk photographer and the relationship between photography and the representation of Native Peoples in North America and also through that, broader notions of looking at people from the inside and the outside and what that means.



and the Poverty of the Liberal Documentary

by John McCullough

In my neighbourhood there is an Italian jewellery and gift shop which sells typical assortment of glossy ceramic figurines (dogs and naked women, predominantly), ornately–framed mirrors and chandeliers whose cut–glass pieces chime: you are poor but we are poverty's relief. The displays have remained the same for years but for slight changes in market demand and product innovation. Currently there are model Ferraris which are really

video-tape rewinders and ceramic Dobermans have been nudged aside by the more cumbersome killer pet and property protector, the Rottweiler. My most recent visit to the shop provided me with a peculiar vision. Peculiar because as it filled me with horror it also seemed quite banal and common-sense. Specifically, how is one to respond nowadays to a small, beautifully-crafted bust of Benito Mussolini complete with 'Il Duce' engraved into the base?

If shock is the initial response it soon gives way to curiosity as to whether this is a sign of the times or just an entrepreneurial aberration. Does this relate to Canada's neo-conservative social environment or the Old World's current infatuation with fascism? Certainly the local context is conducive to fascist flag-waving. With the Reform Party blustering about as though it had a program other than the politics of intolerance and the Heritage Front, KKK, and Aryan Nations revelling in any attention and legitimation the media or the voting public offers them surely the right is in ascendance. This is further confirmed by the federal government's endless attempts to refocus criticism of domestic policy onto 'more significant' problems like the Quebec referendum or Maritime fishing and other 'medialities' which are presented as attacks on Canadian sovereignty and nationhood. In fact, it is

collective hysteria, in this year's budget. Fighting back, when it gets to the level of fiscal policy, becomes a flurry of slashes to social programmes and state operations many of which the private sector finds unprofitable (the CBC), unethical (welfare) or just distasteful (regulatory bodies). The cumulative effect is to leave already impoverished classes tenuously hanging above a virtually nonexistent social net. If they once believed themselves the victims of the liberal welfare state's intrusions (as defined by the Reform Party and the PCs) they will soon realize that it is the neo-conservative anti-government, pro-multinational counterattack which will grind them to dust. For those interested in protecting themselves and their interests in this predatory landscape the message is clear: you are scared, conform or perish. In this way neo-conservative politics, if not immediately linked to fascism,



this sense of being under attack which characterizes life in Canada at the end of the century. The national debt attacks AAA ratings, immigrants attack 'Canadian' identity, women and minorities attack job security, environmentalists attack big business, abortionists attack babies, AIDS and cancer attack the populace, gays and lesbians attack the family and the mass media attack the young and old alike. The neo-conservative response to these perceived attacks is to fuel the hysteria with calls for drastic action and never once a concerted effort to define the nature of the disparity between the presumed utopia of democratic capitalism and its present themes of malice and mayhem. These calls (whether a televised 'town hall meeting' to protest taxes, a direct action on an abortion clinic, a letter campaign to media executives to threaten a boycott or a court appearance by fascists which is packaged as 'news') all repeat the same refrain: we are fighting back. Finance Minister Paul Martin, Jr voiced the same refrain, influenced by and borrowing from the

nonetheless provides the policies, ideologies and institutional structures to encourage social hyper—conformity. It confirms by way of its professed faith in classical economics and the invisible hand of capitalism the primacy of the ideology of individualism which works, in this context, not so much to empower anyone but to threaten them with their newly found vulnerability. Conformity is the price of radical neo—conservative individualism. Rush Limbaugh is constantly voicing the sentiment that you are your own maker and to deviate from this norm is, in his own words, "just plain stupid".

It is from within this context of neo-conservatism (fascist curios, popular sentiment, government policy and the spectre of European fascism past and present) that I want to discuss *Hearts of Hate: The Battle For Young Minds*, a documentary film which features the most extreme elements of Canadian right-wing movements. Directed and produced by Peter Raymont (*History On the Run, The World is Watching*

and *Magic In the Sky*) the film premiered in the last hour of prime–time (10–11pm) on the CTV national network on Tuesday, February 28. As the film features extensive footage of contemporary fascists it provides the uninitiated with a shocking portrayal of hate in Canadian society. According to Raymont,

Canadians think we're all so tolerant. The media hide the reality of what most kids know...and their parents want to ignore or resist it. We seem to believe that the less we know the better.¹

The intention of *Hearts of Hate* is to counter this negligence and willed ignorance with exposure and, as the press kit indicates, the producers "hope that after viewers watch this documentary they will be more aware of the growth of racist propaganda in their own neighbourhoods." In more figurative language Raymont claims that "if there are rodents in my house, I

It is clear, then, that the film will serve up some fairly crude fare and we anticipate that the shock is necessary to pull us out of our myopic ignorance. During this on–camera segment Raymont makes a declaration that is useful to keep in mind while evaluating his film. Taking time to express his specific beliefs about making films Raymont states that he "always thought it was the role of documentary filmmakers to shine a bright light into the dark corners of our society." Right–wing extremists are Raymont's target this time around and by shining a light in their direction he intends to provide Canada with a "frightening wake–up call."

This goal leads Raymont to consciously develop a specific formal structure. It is based on two design principles which are mutually–supportive. The first principle is that of the 'bright light'. *Hearts of Hate* provides extensive coverage of fascists in Canada: we see



don't turn off the lights and hope they'll go away. I want to expose them for what they are, get rid of them." As critic Greg Quill states, the filmmaker anticipates that by providing them enough rope the fascists will hang themselves.

In the opening moments of the film Raymont clearly indicates what he hopes to achieve. He warns that the film will be a "disturbing journey...where we will see how our children are being manipulated by fear and recruited by hatemongers." This introduction is presented as narration over a montage of confrontational images including several symbolic gestures and images. The image of a swastika spray—painted on a brick wall serves as a segue to introduce Raymont, now in front of the camera, as he addresses the audience regarding the nature of the film and his technique in representing the topic of fascism in Canada. He concludes by inviting the viewer "to join us on a disturbing, often frightening, journey as we try to discover why so many of our young people are being drawn into the heart of hate."

them at rallies and marches and we also see quotidian fascist activities like postering and band rehearsals. In this sense, the fascists are well–illuminated. The second principle can be typified as one of 'non–rebuttal'. Rarely are fascist claims contested in the film and, when they are, a case is never constructed that would significantly diminish their emotional effect. Raymont has argued in *Starweek* that "balance would have diluted it" and, by this, I take him to mean that the fascists would not have shone so offensively bright if criticized.

Raymont defends this formal strategy on two counts. First, he claims to be an anthropologist, not a journalist. To this extent he feels no debt to the 'fairness doctrine' which is part of professional journalism's creed and would oblige him to show all sides of an issue equitably. Furthermore, by aligning his work with the study of humankind he neutralizes any sense of an agenda which might be associated with being a tabloid

¹ Interview with Greg Quill in Starweek, Feb. 25 – Mar. 4, 1995, p. 13.



journalist, on the one hand, or a political commentator, on the other. The effect of the 'anthropology defence' is to suggest that Raymont is working on a level removed from commercial or ideological squabbles: like many documentarists he is on a mission to find and show the truth.

The second defence which Raymont offers is that the formal structure, no matter what its weakness, provides a much-needed wake-up call to Canadians. This 'greater good' serves as a compelling justification for the film's design and certainly some of the fascist's pronouncements should shock a complacent nation. Nonetheless, while the intentions of the film are obviously honourable I will argue that the film, structured as it is, is a disservice to anti-racist activists and those in the audience -- the majority I would hope -- who want tools to fight racism and fascism. In short, I believe the film mystifies knowledge about fascism and thus limits resistance to it. Initially, though, the film's achievements should be acknowledged.

There is no doubt that the film's principle achievement is its identification of many of Canada's fascist leaders. Repeatedly they are present on the screen: exhorting their followers to take pride in their race, monosyllabically reflecting on their commitment to fascism and giddily explaining strategy. Given that a fascist's preferred mode of address is a staccato litany of simpleminded verbalizations, the choice of using fascists to wake the nation seems obvious. No alarm clock could be so irritating or insistent. As well, as predictable as the fascist personality is, there is no denying its ability to evoke terror. This evocation is dependent on a flair for crude fashion and the thrill of creating a public image. In Hearts of Hate the leaders provide multiple examples of this strategy. Their posturing is calculated and the symbols and gestures are recognizable from any number of media representations of Nazis and racists. In fact, Wolfgang Droege and George Burdi (both leaders in the Heritage Front) are particularly cinematic if not downright cartoonish: while they aspire to the sleek poison of Triumph of the Will, all their cues seem to come from Death Wish, GI Joe and Steven Segal.

Laughable as their posing may seem, their messages and their actions are chilling. When Droege recounts his tangential association with The Order (whose bible is *The Turner Diaries*) and indifferently states that "some murders were committed; what happened happened" the audience should rightfully be alarmed.

Another achievement of the film is the coverage of the immediate histories of some prominent Canadian fascists and their areas of operation. While the film does not provide an extensive history of fascism in Canada there is enough of a framework to understand that this is not a particularly new problem or an aberration in the history of the nation. Also, the brief description of the geographical range of the numerous fascist groups in Canada suggests that there are regional variations in the cut of the cloth of hate ideology. As the film proceeds, though, a Toronto- and Ottawa-centric emphasis is clear. In fact, there is no coverage of fascism east of Ottawa and this disregards an enormous amount of violence and literature which is generated in the eastern provinces (e.g. Quebec's KKK and the hate literature of Malcolm Ross).

The film is useful as well in portraying the types of technology used by fascists. Whether it be posters, rock bands, video tapes, phone lines or Internet sites fascism invades mass media. This is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it is important to recognize that the form of democracy that operates in the mass media (i.e. if you can afford it, you can use it) also works to perpetuate the populist rhetoric of free speech which fascists regularly invoke to defend their hate propaganda. In a clever juxtaposition late in the film Raymont shows Droege wearily charging that "if nobody is going to give us anything we are just going to have to take it" and then proceeding to cut into a fancily-iced cake on which is written "Free Speech is the Issue". This is witty filmmaking as it draws attention to the fact that on the 'free speech' issue, at least, fascists routinely prove the old adage false: you can have your cake and eat it too. Fascists in Canada have repeatedly evaded charges and long-term convictions for hate crimes by appealing to free speech rights and have effectively had their desire to terrorize and vilify defended by the legal system.

The second important conclusion regarding the technology used by fascists in Canada is the increasing difficulty faced by those attempting to monitor and police hate propaganda. A good example is included in the film as we hear the Heritage Front's hate line propagandist Gary Schipper, jailed at the time for operating the hate line, delivering his new message "from the Don Jail". If phone lines are this difficult to police then Tony McAleer, identified in the film as the founder of the hate line Liberty Net and a manager of hate—rock groups, is entirely justified in his bravado regarding the potential for hate on the Internet.

Finally, the film achieves a certain amount of success in documenting the types of messages that fascists propagate. As difficult as these messages are to accept their inclusion in anti-racist work is necessary for a few reasons. The most obvious is that without these messages the truly hyena-like character of fascism is stripped of one of its crucial devices: language and the use of language for defamation and hate. The messages serve as an immediate reminder of the venal nature of fascist propaganda and this is clearly useful in motivating resistance to such propaganda. An even more honourable purpose is served when these messages are used to introduce young people to critical strategies capable of deconstructing the rhetoric of fascism. By recognizing this rhetoric in the language of everyday prejudice the young are that much more capable of countering racist and fascist lies with historical truths.

I now want to attend to the film's shortcomings and I will conclude by way of providing some recommendations regarding the making of anti-fascist documentaries. On the most obvious level *Hearts of Hate* is

problematic to the extent that it provides fascists with the better part of an hour of uncontested exposure. Droege himself points to the problem of this approach by explaining that "a minute, or just even seconds (sic), on the news provides you with a certain profile and it leads the public to believe that you're out there doing things." Additionally, the footage can potentially be used not only to establish 'presence' but as recruiting material either as is or as appropriated and re–packaged. For a film which goes to great lengths to establish the fascists' media savvy there is no attempt to limit the amount of material which is appropriable by Nazis.

The second failing of the film is its presupposition that criticism of the fascists is an obvious outcome. This assumes that the film will play to an audience which considers fascism repugnant. It also assumes that this audience, even if they are repulsed by fascist rhetoric, will have the critical ability to evaluate fascist claims. Both assumptions are misguided and this is acknowledged by the critical aid booklet which was distributed to students by the producers of the film. It provides commentary and answers which clearly respond to fascist and racist claims. It even includes a warning that propaganda should not go unchallenged: a warning the filmmaker ignores. Raymont, in an interview with Starweek, acknowledges the ambivalence of liberal media coverage but defends his approach by claiming that one "can't turn your back on nastiness for fear someone else will find it intriguing". To describe Nazism as "nastiness" seems somewhat flippant and to absolve oneself of the responsibility to comment on fascist lies and misrepresentation of history strikes me as enormously arrogant.

On a more abstract level, but one that has been thoroughly analyzed in the twentieth century, the nature of fascist propaganda devices must be thoroughly understood before re–presenting them. Specifically, when portraying fascists and their ideas it is necessary to fully comprehend the ways in which fascist messages derive their meaning and power. From the evidence provided it is not entirely clear that Raymont has grasped this issue.

Initially, it is crucial to recognize that the power of fascism is derived not from the coherence of its argument but from the repetition of its formulaic and symbolic propaganda. Theodor Adorno suggests that "constant repetition and scarcity of ideas are indispensable ingredients of the entire technique." It is not surprising, then, that in a film which simply wants to "shine a light" on fascists their symbols and formal strategy are seemingly

² Theodor W. Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda" in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (Routledge: London, 1991), p. 115.

ubiquitous. Whether it is skinhead Mike Pratt posing awkwardly in front of his Nazi flags and paraphernalia, Aryan Nations leader Terry Long tugging at the brim of his notorious White Power truckers cap or Burdi thrusting straight—arm salutes the impression is that these are calculated and highly self—conscious attempts to assert symbols as meaning. The best example of a self—authored attempt at symbolic meaning is Droege's often—worn black sweater featuring a wolf emblazoned on its chest. In conscious mimicry of the wolf, Droege stares down Raymont's camera and even if we don't get the pun (Wolfgang — Wolf Gang) we are certainly meant to be chilled to the bone by the Heritage Front leader's animal ferocity. On display in these images, as in all fascist propaganda, is intensity and power.

By constructing a non-critical account of fascists Raymont provides a soft-forum for their propaganda and, to this extent, their power seems to overwhelm anything mounted by anti-racist organizations, the law or law enforcers. When such symbols of power go unchallenged a mythology begins to adhere to them and this mythology assumes an undeserved legitimacy. An example of such myth creation is presented in the film during Droege's presentation at an All-Candidates Meeting held during Metro Toronto's most recent municipal election campaign. Droege is introduced to what seems to be a largely unimpressed audience and states:

If I label myself a racist it's for the reason that I have studied the situation. I can assure you one thing: if I were to win, it would send a message to the rest of the politicians in this country that the Canadian public is fed up with what is happening.

He resumes his seat to a polite round of applause and this suggests that he was able to impress some in the audience with his accusatory, if vague, address. Certainly that is the meaning that the film conveys and while this scene supports Raymont's claim that tolerance for hate ideology is on the rise in Canada it could also serve as a good opportunity to critique fascist ideology. In his speech Droege appeals to the power of the name (he labels himself), the authority of knowledge (he has studied the 'situation' and the intensity of action (he wants to assure a strong message) and these are all ploys common to fascist rhetoric. Apart from establishing himself as a bully, the speech is nothing but smoke and mirrors: its impact derives from its well-rehearsed delivery, its populism and its self-conscious style. The audience is not responding to Droege's ideas so much as his performance. Unfortunately, Raymont makes no comment on the speech and his only narration in this sequence refers to the failure of democracy in allowing all parties access to the political forum and Droege's ability to garner 14% of the vote.

Hearts of Hate typifies the value—neutral media environment in which, according to media critic Jason Berry, "the power of ideas that so animate hate groups remains a murky backdrop." This results in an audience's critical engagement being limited to debating fascist assertions and claims but not their underlying beliefs and appeal (e.g. their intolerance to difference). To this extent, even an audience sympathetic to antifascism does not gain an awareness of how a fascist tendency is fostered by or linked to day—to—day existence although they will recognize and condemn symptomatic displays of fascism like skinheads, swastikas and particular leaders.

Raymont's interest in fascist leaders is interesting in this regard. He explains that after talking to them he "realized it's far more important to know who the leaders are, what their backgrounds are, and where they get their ideas." The filmmaker never explains why the leaders are important but, unwittingly, he has discovered a significant feature of fascist propaganda - its dependence on the image of powerful leadership. But rather than develop a critical commentary about fascist leaders Hearts of Hate helps to perpetuate the cult of personality which is central to fascist ideology. Responding to the allure of fascist leaders, but unwilling to investigate their role in the propaganda, Raymont seems hypnotized by their standardized theatrics and cheap choreography. The film's extensive coverage of Droege, in particular, can be seen to substantiate Adorno's insights regarding the role of fascist leaders. He claims that

(o)ne of the basic devices of personalized fascist propaganda is the concept of the 'great little man', a person who suggests both omnipotence and the idea that he is just one of the folks...untainted by material or spiritual wealth.⁴

By portraying Droege as mastermind of several fascist activities, allowing him to narrate a good chunk of his own biography and provide on-screen explanations of his ideas, Raymont establishes him as an extraordinary Nazi. But Droege is also allowed to be seen as common-folk: at a house party he frolics with a child and an acolyte named Elizabeth speaks of his warmth and humble charm. As well, the film includes several scenes of brawling between anti-racist groups and the Heritage Front and one of the effects of this footage is to confirm Droege's status as a 'great little man'. While Raymont uses the footage to support his view that violent resistance to fascism is counter-productive (i.e. the Heritage Front becomes "victim" in the public eye) his representation of the situation simply re-iterates the theme of victimization and thus presents, on an emotional level, Droege as a besieged believer. To the extent

that *Hearts of Hate* is not critical of the symbolic power or great little men of fascist propaganda it serves in many respects as a confirmation of the legitimacy of the ideologies of hate and intolerance.

The misleading nature of the film can be traced, as I have suggested, to its confusion over its intention and this is related to its liberal disposition. While it professes to be about "the battle for young minds" it is clear by its design that Raymont's fascination with fascist leaders takes precedence over discovering the reasons why Canadians, and especially contemporary youth, are attracted to hate ideology. In the film, Raymont justifies his focus by explaining that the Ottawa riot of May 29, 1993

forced Canadians to see what's simmering beneath the public tolerance: the racist hatred within many young hearts. Suddenly people wanted to know what is the Heritage Front, who are its leaders?

There is no obvious causal link between the first sentence and the second despite the fact that the composition of the phrase suggests an axiomatic relation. This structure can be seen to serve Raymont's goal of shifting focus from the difficult task of investigating "racist hatred" to the much easier task of providing a stage for racist leaders. While the one would help anti–racist projects, the other assists fascist propagandists. By choosing to feature the leaders over their ideas the film plays to fascism's strengths.

Had it been designed as a critical analysis of fascism's appeal the film would have circumscribed the powerful allure of the leaders within social and political contexts. This would have achieved several goals. Most immediately it would have deflated the perceived power of fascist leadership which derives its significance from an artificially- imposed hierarchy. It would have demystified intolerance as well as providing a critique of irrational social prejudice. In a larger frame, such a critique would have suggested how it is that liberal democratic society, a product of the Enlightenment, holds within it the kernel of its opposite: ignorance and hate. This would offer a 'wake-up call' directed at politicians and social elites not about fascism, as is Raymont's intention, but about social injustice. Finally, such a critique would provide a film that would be political by design, not anthropological or sociological.

To conclude I will provide some recommendations for the design of films dealing with the themes of racism and fascism. First, there is a need for "committed" documentaries which are dedicated to anti–racism.⁵ The focus of such work moves, then, from fascination with racists and fascists to critical response to them. In short, the populace must be armed with knowledge.

Second, it is a mistake to overestimate the critical faculties of the audience. After years of exposure to the 'atrocity exhibit' that so often stands in for information in mass culture it must be assumed that there is a significant amount of indifference and ignorance which has to be sliced through. For instance, though many liberal filmmakers assume a common historical awareness in the population and refrain from so-called condescending addresses to their audience on matters of history it must be recognized that, in North America especially, the events of the past are remembered selectively, if at all. We are a culture dedicated to the ethos of modernity: we attend to the future, not the past.

Third, anti-racist filmmakers can undercut the visceral appeal of fascist presentations with a variety of formal strategies. For instance, it would be wise to refrain from using lo-angle camera coverage of fascist speakers or leaders. These shots convey an emotion of power to the viewer which is seldom justified by the speaker's performance and has no justification as regards the content of the speeches or the ideology of fascism. Raymont's film is littered with lo-angle shots and these are often accentuated with other formal devices such as lighting, composition and musical accompaniment.

Also, when representing a fascist speech it is preferable to use brief clips of the speakers (to avoid long sequences being appropriated by Nazis for their own tapes) and, better yet, feature the audience more than the speakers and avoid tight framing which leads to overestimation of the size of the crowds and, hence, the enormity of the threat. By privileging the audience in these representations there is an effect of undermining much of the meaning of the speeches which often rely on the speakers' choreography of body and facial gestures. Moreover, the portrayal of the sheep-like performance of the audience clearly documents the irrational nature of fascist activities. Hearts of Hate, as a liberal view of fascism, uses a pseudo shot-reverse-shot technique to simulate the call- and-response relationship between speaker and audience. For instance, a shot of George Burdi saluting is followed by a shot of the audience standing, shouting "White Power" and saluting back and this is followed by a shot of Burdi responding to them and leading them in the next chant. The effect essentially replicates the event, it does not challenge it.

³ Jason Berry, "David Duke: Triumph of the Image", *Television Quarterly*, V. 25 n. 4, 1992, p. 18.

⁴ Adorno, p. 122.

⁵ The theory and aesthetics of the "committed" documentary are the subject of Thomas Waugh's anthology "Show Us Life" (Scarecrow Press: Metuchen, New Jersey, 1984).

In providing critiques of hatemongering "committed" anti-fascist filmmakers should invent and borrow techniques which unequivocally undermine the images and sound of Nazis. Voice-overs and especially printed text on top of Nazi imagery can be used to assert truths against fascist lies. Music and soundtracks should be used to contradict the fascists' intended meaning. For example, the shrieks of a psychotic gradually overtaking the voice of a Nazi speaker or marching rhythms and the sound of the assembly-line accompanying Heritage Front marches would characterize the fascists as abnormal, on the one hand, but also clearly associated with the most mind-numbing routines and institutions of modernity. Raymont, contrary to this approach, paints fascism and its leaders as mysterious and inexplicable by using a series of musical segues which would be right at home in X-Files.

Because much of the emotional and unconscious power of any image is aesthetic, it makes sense for anti–fascists to create unflattering images of Nazis. They may in fact go to the extreme of using degraded, treated or damaged images of Nazis to create a negative emotional impact. In the final moments of *Hearts of Hate* there is an instructive montage of Schipper, Droege and Burdi which really tells the tale of the Heritage Front. Dragging on cigarettes and snarling at the world these are the faces of underworld thugs. It is unfortunate that this strong visual message is undercut by a defeatist narration which states that

whatever happens to Droege and the Heritage Front there are many Canadians who hold within them deep resentments and racist feelings and organized racism will remake itself luring us and our children into the heart of hate.

As accurate as this observation may be, it nonetheless suggests that intolerance is inherent to society and this clearly serves to disempower the viewer.

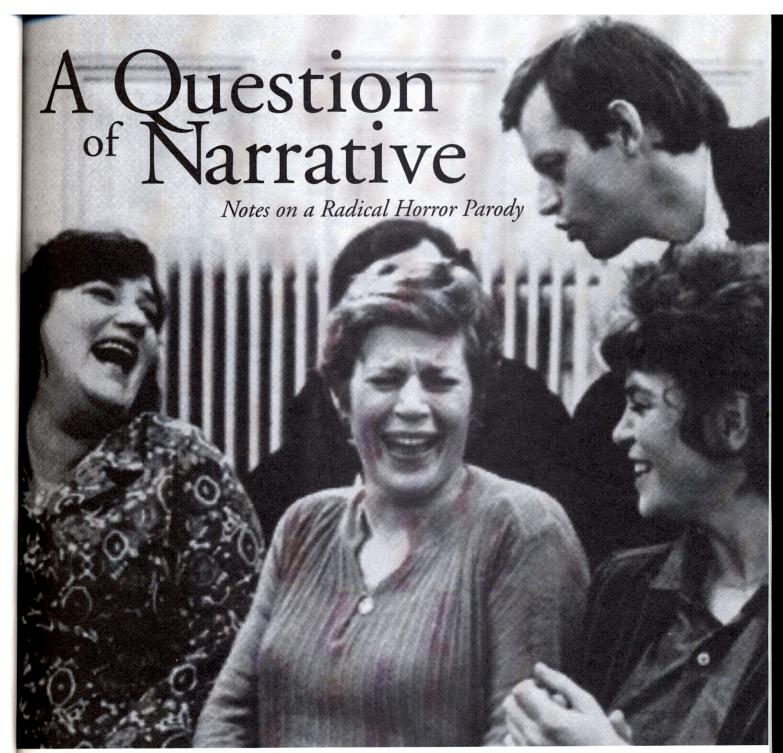
Another technique of criticism is the construction of useful juxtapositions that provide the viewer with a clear understanding of the issues. By referring to a missed opportunity in *Hearts of Hate* I will suggest the value of this device. In one of the film's few interviews with anti–racist activists, Keith Rutherford, a survivor of skinhead/Aryan Nations violence, states that "there is no doubt in my mind that there is sympathy (for racism) in high places, in judiciary, in the government...I think law enforcement as well." This seems like a perfect lead—in to a investigation of these charges and possible substantiation. In fact, it would seem relevant to at least juxtapose this charge with documentation of Canada's tolerance for intolerance. Examples could include for-

mer B.C. Premier Vander Zalm's associations with fascists; criticism of racist cops in Toronto and Montreal; the known presence of significant numbers of Nazis in the Armed Forces; the race theories propagated by 'teachers' Jim Keegstra, Phil Rushton and Malcolm Ross; or the increased hostility to liberal immigrant policies as expressed by government officials and politicians.6 Instead of this, Raymont fol-Rutherford's comments aesthetically-pleasing but critically-bankrupt montage of slow-motion and lap-dissolved images of Aryan Nations leader Terry Long and other fascists, a cross "lighting" and images from the Aryan Nations' rally in Provost, Alberta. On the soundtrack, Rutherford and skinhead enforcer Brett Hayes comment on the current "holy war" and, of course, the music is foreboding and ethereal, as in Twin Peaks when evil is near. After this sequence the first commercial break occurs. Rutherford's claim, which he has actually developed into a 2.5 million dollar civil action suit, is ultimately trivialized by aesthetics and vague talk of a holy war.

Finally, discussion groups and panel presentations before and after screenings of films about racists should be a common practice. This did not happen at CTV although TVOntario, several weeks after the premiere of Hearts of Hate, followed their broadcast of Profession: Neo-Nazi with a panel discussion and phone-in segment. The contrast between the two presentations suggested that the strategy of providing context to such films can encourage critical engagement with issues like fascism and intolerance and their representations in the media. Regardless of the particular nuance of a film, panels allow experts in the field to clearly state that fascism is understandable and stoppable. The audience can learn about hate crime laws and this can lead to an increased obligation for the judiciary to enforce them and the police to act on them. By emphasising the negative effect of convictions on hate groups, the population is assured that positive social change is conceivable.

Rather than disarming the audience with mystification, fear and threats, films and TV programs about racists and fascists should serve to empower the population. Additionally, a Marxist critique of fascism would not only encourage responsible documentary strategy but its ability to provide thorough social analysis and programmatic solutions would clearly link neo-conservative politics to fascism's allure which *Hearts of Hate* finds so frightening, inexplicable and inevitable.

⁶ This material is documented in Warren Kinsella's Web of Hate: Inside Canada's Far Right Network (HarperCollins: Toronto, 1994).



A Question of Silence

by Cosimo Urbano

here exist a few films which invite us to re-examine the relationship between narrative and its potentially radical uses. I do not think I am too far away from the truth if I state that today the Left (and above all the academic Left) still has a somehow conflictual relationship with narrative. After more than 20 years of post-structuralism and deconstruction, narratives and their Authors (who, despite having been pronounced dead, continue to haunt us with all their idiosyncratically different voices) still have not been successfully disposed of. It is the very pervasiveness

of narrative in all human cultures that makes the question all the more thorny. Does this pervasiveness undermine the logic of those theories according to which narrative is an ontologically limiting and constricting aesthetic form, and a reactionary and repressive ideological construct? Or, as some would still argue, can the very fact that narrative is so popular be interpreted as symptomatic of its inherently negative characteristics?

I shall leave these brief observations for the reader to ponder, if s/he wishes to do so. The goal of this essay is not that of pointing out the internal contradictions of the various schools of criticism which, openly or unconsciously, undemine and/or criticize narrative per se. Nor am I going to argue that narrative by and large has not been historically appropriated and used by reactionary forces (just like—unfortunately—any other cultural form). Rather, all I would like to do is simply to suggest how in certain cases narrative, understood in the very terms used by its detractors, can and has been used for radical purposes.

A film like A Question of Silence (Marleene Gorris, 1982) seems to me to be a very apt text through which to develop this argument since it is, and I hope I shall find a very large consensus here, a truly radical text. It's not simply "liberal" or "left-wing." Its attack on, and deconstruction of, some of the very basic defining categories of patriarchal capitalist thought certainly cannot be recuperated in any way by that same thought. At certain points in their history some European nations went as far as allowing the political arms of certain terrorist groups to win one or two seats in their parliaments. None of the women who silently side up together during Gorris' film could ever expect the same. Their relationship to the "system" is, quite simply, one of absolute incompatibility.

I shall argue that the film conveys this point very clearly and unambiguously, and that it does this through what is ultimately a classical narrative structure. I shall then argue that A Question of Silence also consciously exploits certain themes and audience expectations derived from the modern horror film in such a way as to become what Mikhail Bakhtin would call a parody of that genre. Underlining both arguments, implied in them in a sense, lies the conviction on my part that both these formal strategies have been chosen by Gorris precisely because of the results they could achieve. Far from being radical "despite" its being a classical narrative, the film is radical because of it—that is, it achieves what it does precisely through its use of narrative.

Before going any further I must pause to make clear that when I speak of classical narrative structure I am by no means referring to the studies of classical Hollywood cinema by the likes of David Bordwell and Thomas Schatz. While finding these works to be sometimes useful and correct, I am far from being convinced that they account for more than a small portion of our understanding and fascination with filmic narratives.

When I refer to classical narrative I am rather thinking of a wider pool of rules, codes, and devices that through the centuries and in many different art forms (epic, drama, the novel, and so on) have come to be understood as classical. Classical Hollywood cinema has certainly, and quite brilliantly, appropriated some of them, but not all. Yet this too often seems to be forgotten, with the most unfortunate consequence of collapsing the notion of classical narrative within that of the classical Hollywood film. And this consequently entails that very often we end up confusing the ideological implications of a very specific (both historically and geographically) cultural product, the Hollywood film, with the (alleged) implications of classical narrative itself, of which the Hollywood film is but one of the many potential and actual instances.

My calling A Question of Silence a classical narrative is based on a number of notions derived from this wider spectrum of narrative elements. First of all, I shall point to the notion of the principal character, the hero. The hero, far from being a stand-in for the spectator/reader (and here we might have another example of how film theory's enormous stress on the concept of identification might have confused our ideas about classical narrative more than clarifying them), is instead above all the principal means through which the classical narrative organizes itself. Whether we want to call the hero a function or an anchor, the main focalizer or, much more simply, the main character in the story, s/he is necessary for the classical story to exist. Don Quixote and Othello



A Question of Silence



are not the same thing as the narratives in which they appear, but their stories would not exist without them. To argue that because of this we identify with them in the sense that the theories of cinematic identification have tried to convince us that we identify with the white male hero of, say, *Casablanca*, would seem to me to be a grave misreading of the nature and effects of the narratives in which these heroes appear.

A Question of Silence has as its heroine a successful psychiatrist living in an advanced democracy like Holland and married to a liberal lawyer who seems to be the perfect husband for a smart career woman. We can say that the film is about her in the sense that what the film is really about (the condition of women in a capitalist and patriarchal society) is expressed through her and her predicament. From its very beginning, the film uses a number of classical devices (in their cinematic form) to alert us that it is her that we must concentrate on: longer screen time, a great number of close-ups, dialogue-less scenes in which we see her thinking with music on the soundtrack, and so on. On

the narrative level she assumes the role of the psychiatrist/detective, she has to "solve" a case, to come up with answers to a number of questions, and, as the true hero that she is, she does. The fact that her answers will bring her to reconsider her own sense of identity and eventually shift her alliances, is also not uncommon in classical narratives. Hers is a tale of change and becoming, and not unexpectedly the film ends once her decision has been made. Interestingly enough some of the spectators might by then—that is, by the end—have already reached for themselves the conclusion to which the heroine has just arrived (again one only needs to think of Othello to realize how classical the device of having the readers know or understand more than the hero is), but it is only by having her arriving at that decision that the film can end, having, as all classical narratives do, structured itself around her story.

Another classical aspect of the film's narrative is the way in which its end recalls its beginning. A classical narrative is not merely interrupted at one point; its end must offer, in one way or another, a sense of closure. The very final shot, the psychiatrist refusing to join the husband who is urging her to go home with him by turning instead her smiling face towards the women witnesses, clearly answers the very first shot of the film where it had been the heroine who tried, successfully in that case, to persuade her husband to make love.

On a more thematic level, a few seconds before making her final and most significant gesture (the silent smile), the heroine had been bumped by a hurrying young man as she was coming down the courtroom's steps. The young man's remark had been: "Look where you're going, cunt!" This seems to me to be a very fitting, and very classical, way for the film to remind us of the three scenes that had been intercut with the opening credits and that I take to be exemplary depictions of the different forms of sexism to which the three murderesses were daily subjected. The film has thus classically come full circle, and having made clear to its spectators, and finally to its heroine, the degree of pervasiveness of sexist attitudes in the society it depicts, fittingly underlines, just before its very end, how not even its highly successful and respected professional heroine can consider herself free and immune from such attitudes.

It could be argued that the film is not classical because of its debunking of the importance of traditional hermeneutic questions: who are the three murderesses, did they know each other and the victim, did they have a motive, and so on. I think that this is certainly an aspect of the film's project, yet it must be realized that it does not entail the film's total renunciation of the classical hermeneutic code. After all, all the

above questions are still clearly asked within the film by the heroine herself, and it is only through her pursuing them that she can come, and we with her, to the realisation that they are not the relevant questions to ask. Moreover on a secondary, yet even more important, level the film nevertheless does move forward by raising a series of other questions such as: will she understand the implications of what she's seeing and doing, and (most importantly) what will she do? The fact that we are never told the outcome of the trial is but another example of how closely related the film's narrative line and the heroine's inner struggle are: the film ends with an act which signals the resolution of her inner struggle. In fact the film is the chronicle of her inner struggle, this chronicle and the narrative are but the same thing.

Must this characteristic of the film (i.e. its adhering to classical notions of narrative structure) in itself undermine its capacity to expose and condemn the patriarchal and capitalist status quo? Obviously not, and in fact I would go as far as to suggest that the film would have still managed to do both those things even if its heroine had not made the right choice. The relationship of the classical text to its hero is rather like the one of the body to the spine; they can't be separated but are not the same thing. The fact that the psychiatrist does make the right choice has nothing to do with the film's potential in criticizing the society it depicts, and everything to do with the degree of pleasure that the film decides to grant those of its spectators who are convinced that that was indeed the right choice for her to make.

To argue that A Question of Silence also stands in a parodic relationship with the modern horror film would seem to be a more difficult task to accomplish. After all, if the film does not look and "feel" like a classical text, it certainly does not remind one of the horror genre either. And yet the parallels and the connections seem to me to be so many that it might be worthwhile to reconsider one's first reaction to the film. There is however also another possible line of counter-argument to my thesis according to which, even if all these observations can be accepted as somehow exact, they still refer to the least fundamental aspects of the film. The film might be a classical narrative and might use certain themes and tropes of the horror genre, but it's not interesting and significant because of this. On the contrary, these characteristics are in fact the least interesting ones of the film, whose ultimate value lies instead in its idiosyncratic and original aspects. My response to this argument is that the film manages to be so interesting and original not by breaking new narrative grounds or by setting up the conditions of its own reception, but precisely because of its radical appropriation and use of classical conventions. To fully understand and celebrate its achievements, therefore, one cannot overlook or discard the film's narrative structure or its inter-textual parallels as if they were unimportant or irrelevant to its success.

There are two groups of reasons which to me suggest a close link between A Question of Silence and the modern horror film. The first group is constituted by a number of sequences or scenes which seem to, for lack of a better term, "quote" some of the genre's formal conventions. The murder sequence is of course the clearest example of this. Unlike what happens in most of the rest of the film, the camera's presence in this sequence is made very obvious by its continuous floating around the characters. From the very beginning of the sequence with the shots of the three women approaching the boutique from various directions, the film links this wandering camera with an ominous, and yet itself self-consciously parodic, musical theme. Inside the shop these two elements, the free-floating wandering camera and the all too noticeable music, combine to produce an effect of both eeriness and detachment. The whole sequence is also staged in a highly choreographic manner, with the women converging from three different angles toward the owner of the shop, stopping simultaneously at various distances before literally blocking him with their bodies.

All through the sequence the women are depicted as if communicating among themselves through exchanges of glances, and here again the film is almost self-reflexive in the way musical effects clearly and loudly highlight these glances as significant moments. Each time one of the women looks at another, a loud chord is heard on the soundtrack up to the point when, communication having been established and the decision having been made, the musical "cues" begin to be applied to the individual blows with which the women strike the man.

Formal elements such as the wandering camera and a loud, accenting soundtrack had, by the year the film was released (1982), become so clearly recognized as signifiers of horrific threats in the horror genre that they were beginning to be put in quotes by certain horror films themselves (Sam Raimi's Evil Dead is only one of the examples here). I shall come back to the effect their peculiar self-conscious use achieves in this sequence to try to suggest how the film's relationship to the genre, unlike its relationship to classical narrative, is one of qualification rather than mere appropriation. For the time being, however, I hope that pointing out the degree to which the film refers to them will help us acknowledging their prominence and importance.

Another sequence much indebted to the genre is what I shall call the "nightmare" sequence. Interestingly this is also to an extent truly horrific, or at least truly disturbing and disconcerting. It is also the turning point in the heroine's struggle to "solve" the case and under-

stand the implications of what's going on around her, and when all these observations are taken into account it might very well be understood as a central sequence, if not the central sequence, of the entire film.

The sequence begins with the heroine's husband discussing the Dutch legal system in thoughtful, liberal, and yet somehow hollow terms during a dinner the two are having at their house with a couple of friends. Our dissatisfaction with the husband's words and his tone of voice is only heightened by the psychiatrist's own reactions to them. She is clearly finding it almost impossible to "behave" properly (i.e. without exploding in anger), having slowly come to the point where her husband's self-righteousness has the immediate effect of compounding within her all the doubts and questions that her meetings with the three women have raised in her consciousness.

Suddenly the film cuts to the moment later on in the evening when they are preparing to go to bed. As her husband calls her to join him with obvious sexual advances, the psychiatrist is staring into her dressing mirror, her painfully puzzled expression telling us of her intense and confused mental state. At this point, with her husband's calls persistently audible, we are shown a series of flash-cuts of the three murderesses standing side by side on the murder scene and staring straight at the heroine. These very brief, and in the context almost truly and straightforwardly horrific, shots are intercut with close-ups of the protagonist, and the effect is clearly that of suggesting they are unstoppable products of her mind, the line between thoughts and hallucinations being very thin given the psychological state that her expression and the film's mise-enscene suggests her to be in.

We are then shown her getting into bed while her husband continues to push her to have sex, totally oblivious of her emotional distress. At this point the film abruptly cuts to a shot of her waking up terrorized from a nightmare. As she sits on the bed a very dramatic and high contrast lighting points to her husband lying immobile next to her. Neither her screams nor her jumping up on the bed have woken him up. It does not seem far-fetched to me to argue that for a brief moment the film at least toys with the idea of suggesting she might have killed him, as the overall mise-enscene of the sequence closely resembles a frequently repeated cliché moment in the genre (so cliché in fact that it appears even outside of horror, as , for example, in *Barton Fink*).

Of course, the film not being a horror film, she has not killed her husband, and yet the sequence continues on that same register of formally overemphasised representation of intense and confused mental states. She now goes to her study to replay the tape of one of

her interviews with Andrea, the most talkative and articulate of the three women. As she listens to Andrea's voice, the camera slowly but noticeably moves to an extreme close-up (again in high contrast lighting) of her face covered with perspiration, while on the soundtrack the rhythmic noise made by a pendulum of steel balls that she has just set in motion is picked up and amplified by a variation of the recurring ominous theme.

The overall effect is strikingly similar to the one the film had previously produced during a flashback in which Andrea was shown being humiliated in a boardroom meeting by her male bosses. There too a clearly noticeable track-in shot to an extreme close-up and a corresponding emphasis on shutting down all diegetic sounds through the use of music on the soundtrack had produced not identification with Andrea but a powerful representation of her psychological state. Such a representational strategy is in the first place classical, but if we are to understand these moments as somehow the turning points, or some of the turning points, of both women's lives it is also formally reminiscent of those horrific moments where the human subject is transformed or revealed to have already been transformed into a monster (the locus classicus here being the last shot of Kaufman's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*).

This leads us to the second group of links between the film and the horror genre, what I shall call the "thematic" links. Many of the most interesting recent works on horror have focused on the way the central figure of the monster is represented in horror texts. What I find extremely fascinating in this respect is that the two principal suggestions that can be drawn from these works are both perfectly applicable to the "monsters" in *A Question of Silence*. According to these theorists the monsters' fundamental characteristic is either that of being impure in the sense of not being able to fit into any of the categories that human beings have developed to make sense of their world ("metaphysical misfits" Noel Carrol calls them²), or that of being a more or less distorted figuration of the feminine and/or female sexuality (*The Monstrous Feminine* is the suggestive title of Barbara Creed's book).

The perpetrators of what both the coroner and the prosecutor describe in great many details as a monstrous murder (given the degree to which the body was torn to pieces and its genitals attacked) are in this film not only women, but very ordinary women at that. In fact the film is so clear and straightforward about its "monsters" that it does not feel the need to employ any of those monstrous attributes which according to Creed and Williams have always been used to hide, while at the same time reveal in its monstrosity, the monster's ultimate femininity. And indeed if I would be the first to admit that the film does not elicit horror in its spectators, nevertheless I would also point out the strength of the revulsion and hostility to the film that was reported to have possessed members (male, one would assume) of the audiences during the film's theatrical release. It's as if by stripping the monsters of their horror clothing their danger migrated to the extra-diegetic plane; as if, in other words, by being depicted realistically, they became <u>real</u>.

The other aspect of the monster, that of undermining by its very figuration human cognitive boundaries and classificatory systems, is also at the very core of *A Question of Silence*. The impossibility of resolving the either/or question of whether the three women are sane or whether they had an unknown motive to commit the murder, is at the center of the film both because it is the question that propels the narrative and because it is the question through which the heroine comes to the very classical point of achieving a higher degree of self-consciousness and a sense of her own true identity. The male embodiments of the patriarchal and capitalist ideology in the film feel threatened by the psychiatrist's refusal to label the women as "insane" not so much because of any actual danger (they'll simply lock them up in a jail instead of a mental hospital), but because to accept the implications of the heroine's opinion would literally mean accepting the end of their ideological world.

That for these male characters this is the film's ultimate horror is also suggested by



A Question of Silence



Among the most interesting examples see:

Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis,* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism,* American Film Institute Monograph Series, 3. (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1984).

Carol J. Clover, Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

Noel Carroll, The Philosophy of Horror, (New York: Routledge, 1990).

Carroll, p.54.

the way in which the women who "have joined" (including, by the end of the film, the psychiatrist herself) communicate among themselves. Both the silent exchanges of glances with their implied suggestion of telepathy (one of the sources of the uncanny for Freud³) and the outburst of laughter figured as a contagious propagation of mental illness are very much horror themes. That these elements, together with the ones mentioned above, do not produce any truly horrific effect forces us at this point to confront the issue of why and in which way *A Question of Silence* is a parody of the genre.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Mikhail Bakhtin defines parody with words that seem to me extremely appropriate to Gorris's film. In parody, he writes,

"...as in stylization, the author again speaks in someone's else discourse, but in contrast to stylization parody introduces into that discourse a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original one. The second voice, once having made its home in the other's discourse, clashes hostilely with its primordial host and forces him to serve directly opposing aims....Thus in parody the deliberate palpability of the other's discourse must be particularly sharp and clearly marked. Likewise, the author's intentions must be more individualized and filled with specific content."

It seems to me that neither Gorris's "individualized intentions" nor her film's peculiar "semantic intention" directly opposed to the genre's original discourse need to be deciphered or pointed out here. A Question of Silence quite clearly wears its "message" on its sleeve. What we must examine, then, is how and where the film "clashes hostilely" with its generic host, since it is, according to Bakhtin, precisely on the site of these clashes that the second parodic voice can take possession of the generic text and make it serve those "directly opposing aims" which I am assuming provide Gorris's film's greatest interest and pleasure for its audience. If, in other words, A Question of Silence deliberately puts on display the "particularly sharp and clearly marked palpability" of the horror genre's discourse (the women as monster, the use of the wandering camera and music in the murder scene, and so on), in what other ways does it differ from the genre?

First of all, I would suggest that the very fact that the psychiatrist comes by the end of the film to find a new sense of identity by rejecting her husband's, and the Law's, ideological discourse, the very fact, that is to say, that she <u>changes</u> clearly differentiates her from a typical horror heroine. To use Bakhtin's terms again, horror is a tale of testing, not of change or becoming. The hero, or the heroine, in a horror story usually survives by "keeping the faith," by remaining him or herself despite and in face of all the dangers and the horror. If s/he "changes" at all, this change is usually to be interpreted as a maturation, a "growing up." The horror narrative becomes precisely the way through which the hero's identity and set of values have the chance of coming out, of being revealed as intrinsically his all along. The hero, or, as in the case of the Final Girl in the slasher sub-genre,5 the heroine have to go through the test of horror to become their true selves. They might fail, as for example by the end of John Carpenter's The Thing, but they can't change. If they do, that becomes, as the already mentioned Invasion of the Body Snatchers clearly suggests, the ultimate horror.

The narrative structure of A Question of Silence is instead much better described as a narrative of "becoming," where

"...[l]ife and its events no longer serve as a touchstone, a means for testing a ready-made character (or at best, as a factor triggering the development of an already preformed and predetermined hero)—now, life and its events, bathed in the light of becoming, reveal themselves as the hero's *experience*, as the school or environment that first forms and formulates the hero's character and world view." 6

The second, and probably most important, "semantic intention" which differentiates the film from its generic host is related to what Carol Clover calls the "alignment with the victim." One of the most welcome gains from the recent theoretical interest on the genre has been the rebuttal of the superficial and deeply mistaken assumption that in these films the audience not only wants but is forced to identify with the killer's point of view and position. The Siskell-Ebert school of critical reading has none too soon been discredited through a series of more thoughtful textual analysis which have led to results similar to Clover's. In her concluding chapter of Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film Clover offers what is in my opinion the best argument yet for the idea that regardless (and this is precisely the reason for which horror is so interesting on a theoretical level) of the audience's gender "...assaultive gazing in horror is by and large the minority position and...the real investment of the genre is in the reactive or introjective position..."8

The alignment with the victim is the mechanism whereby such a reactive or introjective position comes

to be occupied by the spectator, and it seems to me that stating that this is the genre's "real investment" is the same as saying that this position is one of the genre's defining characteristics. Now, such a position is clearly absent from A Question of Silence; we never feel fear or terror during our vision of the film. According to Clover's argument, this should mean that during the film we are never asked to feel any empathy whatsoever with the victim of the "monsters" attack: the boutique owner. Here we must recall how one of the most obvious effects of shooting the murder scene in the parodic way we have previously described was that of putting it, so to speak, "in quotes," of turning it into a remarkably "cold" sequence. Now we should point out how fundamental to this strategy is Gorris's decision of never showing (except for an extremely brief moment at the very beginning of the beating) the man's body once he falls on the ground. The bottom side of the frame keeps him constantly and completely off-screen, allowing the viewer (unlike what happens in a traditional horror film) not to identify with the "victim." The result is that, to a degree arguably even more manipulative than the one reached by certain Hollywood horror films, Gorris's mise-en-scene so thoroughly guides our experience of the sequence that we are never "in danger" of coming to feel the slightest bit uneasy while watching this very real (in its narrative context) murder.

Clearly this is as crucial and fundamental for the film's overall strategy as having depicted the victim as a most ordinary, and most unthreatening, male. If, on the one hand, we must not perceive him as a dangerous and/or nasty individual, on the other we can't possibly be made to feel his punishment upon our own selves.

The time has now come to ask why A Question of Silence should be structured in the way I have argued it's structured, i.e. as a classical narrative and a horror parody. If I was right in calling it, as a way to differentiate it from the horror genre, a narrative of change and becoming, the film's end cannot but be seen as a further example of how narrative closure does not need to equal ideological resolution. If this is accepted, then it becomes quite clear why a radical filmmaker would want to work in a widely understood (and distributed!) medium. The question, in other words (assuming that radical art's primary goal is that of challenging one's sense of identity in order to enlighten and promote progressive changes), is not "why did Gorris decide to make a feature-length narrative film?", but instead "why don't all radical filmmakers do the same?"

The film however is not, according to my argument, simply a narrative of becoming. In fact its being a generic parody is just as essential to its strategy as its

narrative structure. Once again it is a theorist of horror that can help us to understand the reasons for this. According to Barbara Creed (but she is by no means the only one to suggest it): "[i]t may be that the horror genre is more directly responsive to questions of sexual difference, more willing to explore male and female anxieties about the 'other', than film texts which belong to mainstream genres such as the detective, suspense-thriller, comedy and romance films."9 If all this is true, it would seem as if Gorris found indeed the best possible way to present her material to as wide an audience as possible. Her use of a traditional narrative structure combined with the horror genre's peculiar aptness to address questions of sexual difference provided her with the possibility of engaging the viewers with a personal story, while at the same time dealing with mythical (i.e. super-individual) socio-cultural foundations and conflicts typical of generic works. Whereas the secondary characters in films like Missing or The China Syndrome must be realistically individualized, it is in genre texts that we encounter archetypal figures such as the high-school student of the slasher film or the bourgeois boutique owner of Gorris's film.

However, wanting to do much more than "explore" her topics of concern, Gorris used parody, in the Bakhtinian sense, to put her clear stamp on the issues. Her use of the genre is similar (provided one does not lose sight of the many and obvious differences) to Cimino's use of the western in Heaven's Gate: total appropriation plus radical inversion. In Heaven's Gate the moral use of violence on the part of the individual (a sacrosanct and defining theme of the western) ends up being absolutely useless within the narrative context and thoroughly unenjoyable for the spectator. Similarly in A Question of Silence most of the generic elements (together with all they have come to represent) are firmly in place, and yet what's missing is precisely the genre's investment in the spectator's masochistic involvement which usually works to keep all those elements in their ideologically safe and predetermined place. What Gorris has managed to show us, among many other things, is where a horror narrative might lead once the "kick" is taken out of it.

³ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII, London: The Hogart Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, pp. 217-52.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 193.

⁵ Clover, pp. 21-64.

⁶ see note 1.

⁷ Clover, pp. 166-230.

⁸ Clover, pp. 211-212.

⁹ Creed, p. 152.

vurah

by Julian Stringer

The summer of 1994 brought a first batch of feature films by the so-called 'multiplex generation' of young British directors. Writing at the time of their emergence, critic Nick Roddick notes how the "most encouraging aspect of the phenomenon is that its film-makers whole-heartedly embrace the popular, from a distinctly British perspective". He also adds that "the decisive factor" in the success, or otherwise, of the work of Chris Jones (White Angel), Vadim Jean (Beyond Bedlam), Paul Anderson (Shopptng), and Ngozi Onwurah (Welcome To The Terrordome) is the question of whether or not they will continue to work in the United Kingdom, or whether, like recent emigres such as Mick Jackson, Michael Caton-Jones and Danny Cannon, they will be seduced by the box-office attractions of North America¹

As it happens, the latter months of 1994 also found Ngozi Onwurah, the director from the above group who would probably least identify in any straightforward way as "distinctly British", in the United States for a promotional visit. Onwurah, a Nigerian-born, British-bred woman with a white, English mother and black, African father, was showing her work at various locations around the country while preparing *Welcome To The Terrordome* for its New Year premier at the Sundance Film Festival. The film (which Roddick terms "an ambitious, angry allegory of race relations...a serious political argument") will no doubt enhance the reputation of a woman whose films certainly are localized and specific to Britain. Yet it will also fix attention on her ambitious, inter-cultural concern with more global questions of race and identity.

Terrordome promises to be of interest to those North American viewers who know Onwurah's work through three short films, originally made for the British Film Institute or Channel 4 television, now in distribution through New York's Women Make Movies - namely, Coffee Colored Children (1988), The Body Beautiful (1991) and And Still I Rise (1993). All three titles engage political issues by mixing autobiography with a rigorous interrogation of dominant cinematic style. They are the kinds of films that B. Ruby Rich might have in mind when she points out Onwurah's importance to recent developments in women's filmmaking.² The critical and commercial reception of Onwurah's

¹ Nick Roddick, "Weleome to the Multiplex", Sight And Sound, vol. 4, no. 6 (June 1994), p. 28.

² See the latest version of Rich's classic article "In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism", published in Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar and Janice R. Welsch (eds.), *MultÉple Voices In Feminist Film Criticism* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 27-47.

debut feature film, then, carries implications beyond any minimal change of direction it could signal for the British film industry. As in the case of Julie Dash's *Daughters Of The Dust* (1991), it provides another interesting indication of how well the work of a black female film-maker can fare in the commercial market-place.

As I have not yet seen Weleome To The Terrordome I obviously cannot offer any comment on it (the same goes for two other Onwurah titles; Fruits Of Fear (1988) and 1994's Monday's Girls). However, its immanent release does provide a convenient opportunity to look in more detail at the three preparatory earlier works currently in distribution.

The first, Coffee Colored Children, was made while Onwurah attended St. Martin's School of Art in London. It recalls the filmmaker's childhood, that time, not long after her parents had married in Africa in 1957, when the Nigerian Civil War forced her father to send his wife and three children back to the "safety" of England. There, growing up in Newcastle Upon-Tyne as the only black family in sight, the three Onwurah children become isolated from their white mother, and from each other. The film poignantly illustrates what it is like to live under the shadow of racism. As a white man pushes excrement through the front door and a white schoolboy chants "Monkeys eat shit" on the soundtrack, a young girl's voice repeatedly calls out "She is my Mam! She is my Maml...When I grow up I want to be white".

The film-maker's need to recall and make sense of such memories also drives Onwurah's willingness to talk openly about her past. Her recollection of being the only girl in school to take her vest off in summer because that is what she did in Africa - or of skipping school the day after the latest transmission of that notorious (or "distinctly British") experiment in "multicultural" television, Love Thy Neighbor, provides a powerful context for the retrospective look-backs of the narrative. The confused thoughts of a mixed-race childhood ("Domestos wouldn't clean my skin", the now adult voice-over explains over images of a young girl applying bathroom cleaning powder to her cheeks, "because my skin wasn't dirty") are juxtaposed with thoughts and images from the present day, providing a sense of familial understanding and renewed solidarity. In turn, the film's style mixes home movie footage with dramatic reconstructions and fantasies. And yet, in common with Michelle Citron's well-known feminist doeumentary Daughter Rite (1978) it takes some time before you realize that Coffee Colored Children's home movie shots are actually staged for the camera. When that hits home, the whole nature of memory and its definition are then thrown into relief.

The autobiographical nature of Onwurah's work is taken a step further in The Body Beautiful. Here, her real-life mother, Madge Onwurah, appears as herself. The film is a poetic meditation on images of female beauty and mother-daughter bonding, as Ngozi's career as a beautiful teenage model (played by Sian Martin) is contrasted with the facts and effects of Madge's mastectomy. In a scene where Madge uncovers her breast(s) in a sauna, the daughter comes, for the first time, to see her mother as others see her. As well as bringing understanding and love, this awareness also encourages a new validation of the mother's sexuality. In another fantasy scene, a beautiful black man (the kind that she would have met and fantasized about in Nigeria? her husband?) takes Madge to bed and makes love with her. The moment is genuinely taboo-breaking, both in the challenge it sets the viewer to put aside his/her preconceptions about what constitutes attraction (the film as a whole is a snub to, as Madge puts it, "men who define a sliding scale of beauty that stops at women like me") and in its refusal to deny elderly people a fulfilling sex life.

In this film, the concern to encode visually, sensually, the touch of skin upon skin, which would, under other, more normative circumstances, be represented by eager young lovers, is transferred on to the primacy of the mother-daughter relationship. If *The Body Beautiful* is a more polished production than the earlier student film, more adept at integrating its circular pans with the mood swings and peaks of Anthony Quigley and Johnathan Hirst's superb musical score, it is also the more radical work. Its second inter-racial bedroom scene, for example, is another family affair, wherein the black teenage daughter and the white elderly mother lie naked together in one of the clearest and most moving odes to the mother's presence you are ever likely to see.

And Still I Rise is a less obviously autobiographical, more didactic work that, nevertheless, exhibits clear continuities with the very personal concerns of the other two films. Exploring the various myths that have grown up around black female sexuality, it examines the economic, scientific and cultural justifications advanced by white men for their domination over, and degradation of, black women. Once again mixing dramatic reconstructions (e.g. of a slaveowner's rape, or "breaking in" of a new female slave) with documentary footage and interview material, the film, more forcefully than before, introduces the "Idea" of Africa as black women's umbilical cord, their link to a spiritual homeland.

In one memorable section of the film, the expressive culture of black women is contrasted with the less expressive culture of white Britishers. Two versions of

the pop song "Dancing In The Street" are heard at two different carnivals - the black version and the white version. Through Onwurah's careful editing of both the image and sound tracks a clear contrast is constructed. This strategy of using black music is familiar from another recent black British film, although its purpose is somewhat different.

In Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien's The Passion Of Remembrance (1986) two young black women play soul music in a bedroom so as to get in the mood to go out to a club while, downstairs, the father of one of them and his middle-aged best friend play a Caribbean calypso tune to drown out the noise. The scene starts out as friendly antagonism, a battle of the sound systems. But, then, through juxtaposition, the fast pulse of one song seems to bleed over into the slower pulse of the other. The two songs slowly become one, and the four people, split by generational conflict and the flimsy floor of a London high-rise, seem to sway in unison. It is a bravura piece of montage and a brilliant comment on the commonality of black experience. The point was that both young and old shared a feel for their culture's music, if they could but recognize the connections. By contrast, Onwurah in And Still I Rise aims for a target outside the black community in order to provide a witty comment on whites' alienation from their own bodies. While black carnivalgoers get down to Martha and the Vandellas, with the same ease with which the two young friends abandon themselves to hot soul in The Passion Of Remembrance, the whites get caught up in their body movements, dancing forever just off, or just behind of, or just out of step with, the beat. "It's sad", confirms singer Caron Wheeler in interview. "I just feel sorry for them".

The educational value and efficacy of these three films was clearly shown when, in October, Onwurah was invited by Phyllis Klotman and Gloria Gibson-Hudson of Indiana University's Black Film Center/Archive to come to Bloomington to talk about her work and to show some examples of it to their students. (The Archive has an on-going research interest in the activities of black female film-makers from the African diaspora). During her visit, Ngozi Onwurah also kindly consented to be interviewed. She began our discussion by explaining something of her background as a "director for hire" at the BBC. There, she worked on the interesting drama series about two female London private eyes, South Of The Border.³

"I did South Of The Border, but in the meantime I formed a production company (Non-Aligned Productions) with my brother Simon. At the end of my run on South Of The Border I got offered Miss Marple and...what was the other one?...Howard's Way!. So it was a real decision whether I became a BBC drama

director, just going from one thing to another, or whether we took a chance on the production company. I left the BBC and we concentrated on our production company for a while. As it happens, most of the commissions we got were actually from the BBC, because the BBC is like a little club and once you pass you're in. I did quite a few doeumentaries for them, and then I did a BFI short film, *The Body Beautiful*".

"In Britain it's very hard to make the break from television into features, so I actually decided then to apply to the National Film School, because (by British standards anyway!) it is really well resourced, and you get to make a longer piece of your own work. So I went to the NFS in Beaconsfield for 3 years. I worked while I was there the whole time, though, because you get a bursary - which isn't very much - and it's quite a relaxed atmosphere. So I used to take 10 or 12 weeks out and work for the BBC or Channel 4 and then go back. I actually started Terrordome while I was at the NFS".

"We got a commission from PBS and the MacArthur Foundation to do a documentary in Nigeria. It was tied in with a big conference about population growth, but it was a terrible experience. PBS paid money towards making the film, but they paid it to the Foundation, then the Foundation commissioned us, so we didn't have a direct relationship with PBS. We had a hell of a time with the executive producer from the MacArthur Foundation, who came on the shoot with us, because they had a definite criteria as to what the documentary should be about - which was basically population control as opposed to free choice about population (contraceptives for women), and that caused a lot of problems. What I did was, I just didn't shoot the material that would give them the leeway to do any kind of reedit. That's how I got round it".

In recent years, both television and documentary production have also provided a means of support for other black British directors. Sometimes, this has allowed filmmakers to move around the thin line dividing fictional from non-fictional forms. However, black film-workers have often produced their most impressively hybrid results within a collective environment, so it is interesting to ask whether Onwurah has any links with the Black British Film Workshop movement of the 1980s (cf. Women Make Movies also distribute Sankofa's *The Passion Of Remembrance* and Maureen Blackwood's 1988 short *Perfect Image?*).

"When I was at St. Martin's School Of Art in London we got tutored by a lot of people within the

³ See Susan Hayward, "Quand le Policier Anglais Flirte avec la Subversion: *The Bill* et *South Of The Border*", *CinemAction*, no. 57 (1990), pp. 114118.

workshops, because the number of black film-makers is very small - we all know each other. But Simon and I had actually watched what happened to the workshops, which is that they were funded basically by the Greater London Council and Channel 4, and when the GLC got eliminated their funding got eliminated. A lot of them just disappeared. The strong ones survived, but really only two - the Black Audio Film Collective and Sankofa. We made a decision that, in a way, the free market (I'm not a ranting capitalist or anything!) offers a better chance of real independence than being dependent on state funding. Because when policies change your funding criteria changes, and also because all those funding organizations are white, so what they expect you to make, the kinds of films they were passing, were not really the kinds of films that we wanted to make."

"So we actually made a decision to avoid becoming part of the workshops, which meant that we had to do a hell a lot of things like pop promos, corporate videos and in-house commercials for spectacles to make the money to survive as a company. But that was easier than trying to pander to those panels".

And yet it is the case that Ngozi Onwurah's first work came out in tandem with a small outpouring of black British women's films, most of which were made by women associated with the workshops. When Coffee Colored Children was picked up for distribution by the BFI in the late 1980s it was packaged together with three other short titles: Perfect Image?, Dreaming Rivers (Martina Attille, 1988), and I'm British But... (Gurinder Chadha, 1989). As Karen Alexander put it in the Monthly Film Bulletin at the time the "differences between these films, all short 16mm. productions made on small budgets, are as striking as their similarities"⁴, and, indeed, there are some interesting questions to be asked concerning the subsequent career trajectories of the women involved.

Last summer, Chadha's first feature, *Bhaji On The Beach* (1993), along with Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993) become the surprise British hit of the American film season. With *Terrordome* now doing the round of previews, is Onwurah on the verge of occupying a position similar to the one occupied by Chadha? And what similarities or differences now exist between Onwurah and the other women who made those earlier shorts?

"I think it is interesting that you mention *Bhaji* On The Beach, because out of all that crop of black women film-makers who came up around the time of Coffee Colored Children, that whole distribution bunch, I would say that Gurinder and I have gone off on a similar track and the other directors have stayed within the workshop/ funding/teaching cycle, which is what I think they want to do. I know there are a cou-

ple who would rather not be doing that, but then there are some that are more interested in the kinds of things to do with deconstruction and form. There are a couple that would rather be doing more drama and more accessible things".

"But Gurinder and I tend to be on the same panels everywhere. We are of quite a similar attitude and approach - except I don't think Gurinder does actually want to make the move to America. I think she thinks it's too crazy. (And, I don't know, I might well be on a plane going back after a year of being here!). But Gurinder and I get grouped now with the Paul Andersons and Danny Cannon as the British film-makers who want to make more accessible movies. As opposed to the Maureen and Martinas who want to work more like they did with the workshops".

Another (male) figure from the workshops who seems to occupy a position somewhere in the middle of such an equation is Isaac Julien. He started off at Sankofa before branching out into the critical success of Looking For Langston (1990), and the Cannes prizewinner Young Soul Rebels (1991). But while, at his best (e.g. the jaw-dropping final fifteen minutes of Territories (1984) or the whole of Langston) Julien's career so far looks every inch the model of committed and always interesting political filmmaking, the expectations built up by Young Soul Rebels, expectations then rudely squashed by its lackluster box office performance, raise more questions than they can answer about whether black (British) films can be commercial, and about whether (black) British films need international validation. (And if they do, what gets validated for black/white American audiences by their success?). Or is none of this so important?.

"I think it's both. It is important, because of the market. The obvious way to break a black film, if you want to keep it, at source, the kind of film you want to make, is to break it in the black community. And then white people go and see it because of the kind of reviews and response it got. That's your base market, like *Leon The Pig Farmer* (Vadim Jean and Gary Sinyor, 1992) was broken with a base market of the Jewish market. But the black market in Britain isn't so big, so you always have to have a crossover feel to actually get it to succeed in Britain, which may or may not be such a good thing for your film. But I think it is possible".

"We always use the example of black music. Black music is bought across the board by everybody; there are very few people who do not buy black music. So if it is accessible, then the films should be accessible. But, for instance, *Young Soul Rebels* did not do so well in America, but it did quite well in Europe, whereas *Bhaji On The Beach* has done quite well in America *and* Europe".

Black music does seem to be able to keep its dignity and power while attracting mass appeal, but the case of film might still be a little different. In commercial filmmaking, as the budget goes up, the constraints placed on film-makers are tightened - executive producers have even more of a definite criteria as to what films should be about when more money is at stake. Onwurah's present position has interesting implications in terms of the direction her future work might take because, despite her pronouncements over how her work will always be accessible, it does still experiment with different ways of visualizing and articulating experience. (And the political experiences she is talking about are the kind that can often spell boxoffice poison). As Gloria Gibson-Hudson has pointed out in the course of a recent essay on four black women's films from 1991 - And Still I Rise, Daughters Of The Dust, Sidet: Forced Exile (Salem Mekuria, Ethiopia/U.S.A.) and Sisters In The Struggle (Dionne Brand and Ginny Strikeman, Canada) - as such films "explore the multiple dimension of black women's cultural identities their cinematic imperative becomes the promotion of sociopolitical identities which will ignite the consciousness and transform the status of black women worldwide...Black women's identities are not rigid, fixed entities, but fluid - contingent upon personal, cultural, political and social variables. Identity (re)formation is a continuous process of (re)positioning within meaningful socio-historic structures".5

Onwurah's work has affinities with a tradition of recent black cinema that utilizes a diversity of forms in its unravelling of such questions concerning identity politics. In Kobena Mercer's influential work on a black "Diaspora Culture", one that gives space to the "multiaccentuated quality of the voices that speak in these new modes of black film-writing"6 ("I know Kobena", laughs Onwurah. "But I don't understand him half the time!") is an argument about the fundamentally dialogical nature of such a project. Yet perhaps it is now time to move Gibson-Hudson's and Mercer's arguments one step along by raising the question of how possible it will be to keep that multivocal quality, that critical edge, as the budgets and constraints go up. Mercer's insights seem to me to be true of the three Onwurah films distributed in North America by Women Make Movies, but how easy or desirable will it be from now on to make commercial work that mixes in a variety of different forms of narrating - home movies with voice-overs, action with documentary footage, and so on - without being defeated by the levelling power of economics? Will diversity be too hard to achieve?

"I don't think it will be. The whole thing about coming to America is something that I'm yet to find out what the consequences are. I've spoken to Isaac Julien in New York, and he wants to come back. But then he's working for PBS, which is not what I would want to come over and do, anyway. But I think it is so instinctive for me to work in several different ways because I am mixed race as opposed to black - I grew up till I was 9 in an African as opposed to black family, then I came and grew up in a place like Newcastle, which is all white, then I went down to London - and I am a woman as opposed to a man. I think I have got several different ways of doing it".

"All my films so far, even my doeumentaries (which are meant to be "straight" doeumentaries), have always mixed narration with drama reconstructions with other things. We will just have to see how far I am allowed to go with that in America. But in America it would actually have to be somebody coming down on top of me and saying, "No. You can't do that", because I think that, instinctively, whichever way I look at a story, it would combine all those kinds of elements. But being accessible. The great thing about black music was that it was always groundbreaking, but it was always accessible. I think, somehow, film-making that is considered groundbreaking seems to have to be inaccessible, like a very small art-house movie. I don't understand why that has to be the case, why things that are innovative then have to become exclusive. Because black music, from jazz to hip hop and all the other different kinds, broke a lot of rules, but there was a soul in it that meant it was accessible to a wide range of people. And that's what I think my film-making can do".

"We're waiting to see what the reaction to Terrordome will be. There has been a change in the institutional make-up because there has been a groundswell of young film-makers coming up that have done their first feature films. Shopping, Leon The Pig Farmer and Beyond Bedlam are sorts of films that would not have got funding from places like the BFI originally, because the BFI is a very art-house kind of institution, and, basically, there is a whole crop of new filmmakers who wanted to do things more commercially orientated. So there has actually been a change already".

⁴ See Alexander's article, "Mothers, Lovers and Others", ad reviews of the four films by Pam Cook, Sylvia Paskin, Amina Patel and June Givanni, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, October 1989, pp. 314-318.

Gloria J. Gibson-Hudson, "The Ties that Bind: Cinematic Representations by Black Women Filmmakers", *ÇVuarterly Review Of Film And Video*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1994), p. 30, 28.

⁶ Kobena Mercer, "Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination: The Aesthetics of Black Independent Film in Britain", in Manuel Alvarado and John O. Thompson (eds.), *The Media Reader* (London, British Film Institute, 1990), p. 30.

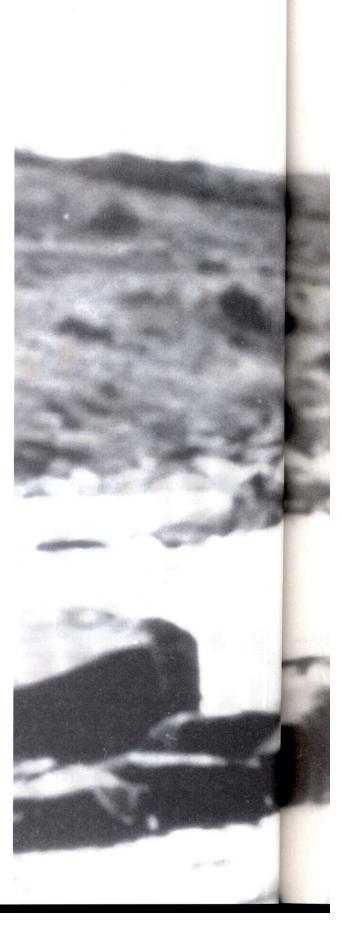
"Now it is possible to go to the BFI with a film that is not necessarily about deconstruction, or whatever the sorts of things that they would have normally commissioned, and get money. Technically, it is possible for me to stay in England now, but there is still the ceiling of 2-3 million pounds, and, in Britain, when you get funding the budget is always for film production. There never is a budget for publicity and promotion afterwards. And then, again, it is hard to break the distribution monopolies. Our cinemas tend to be owned by about four different main companies. So that is what the difference would be in coming to America. If you made it, you would be able to break all of those barriers".

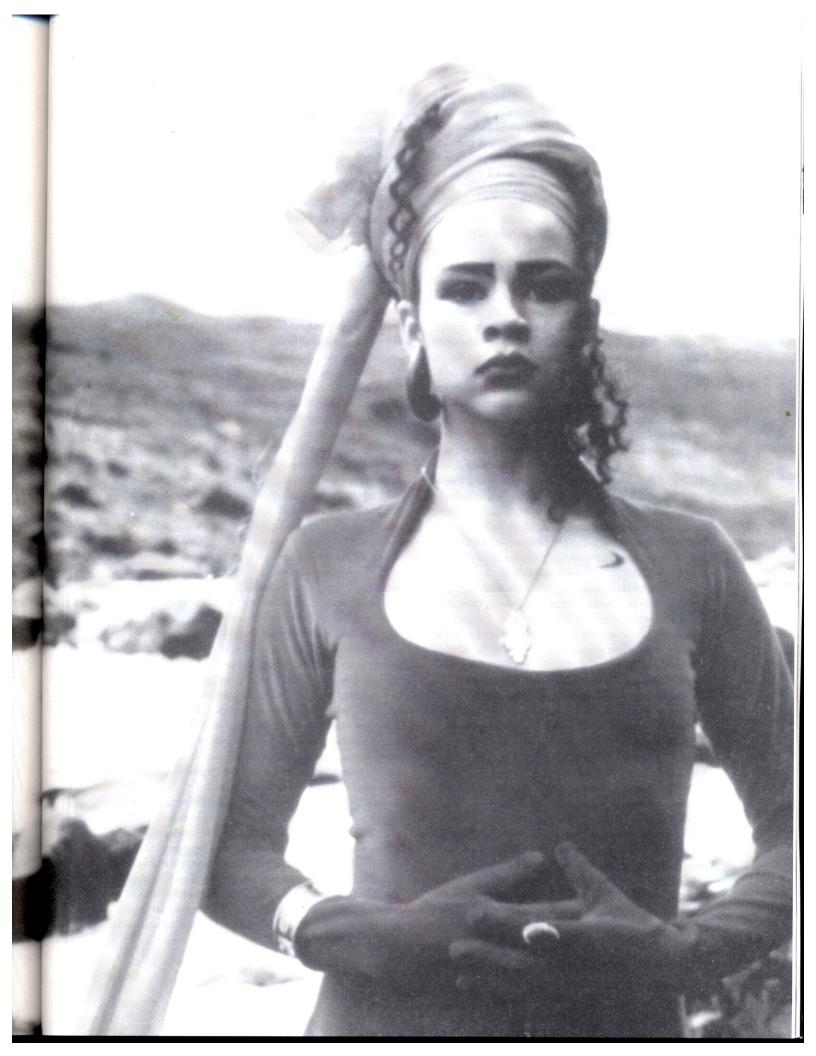
Which still leaves a lot of psychic barriers to be broken. Does Onwurah think that she could make a commercial, accessible film where the kinds of things that the people in *And Still I Rise* say about black women having a certain style, the ability to keep to the beat, could be repeated without just providing material for mainstream, heterosexual male audiences to get off on? Could she prevent her own images from falling in line with the stereotypes (e.g. from Alan Parker's 1987 *Angel Heart* and Richard Wenk's 1986 *Vamp*) she picks apart so well in the film?

"It will be interesting to see. In *And Still I Rise* I really censored myself in the editing, because what the women said in interview was even more off the wall than the bits I used. I was asking the questions, and the assistant director was a black women, and the crew was, so it was a bit like a slumber party!. Everybody was talking the way you really do talk amongst yourselves, as opposed to how you talk when you are on exhibit".

"But I do think there is a move in black film-making generally. Instead of answering the stereotypes all the time - instead of saying, this is a "positive image" because it will be approved of by everybody else - they are saying, "Look. Who is defining what the positive images are?. Look at them; look at their history and their culture. It isn't so hot". We are going to stick with what we are proud of. And if we *are* good dancers and if we *are* good athletes then instead of saying we should not show that (because if we say we are good athletes it means that we cannot be good doctors and lawyers) we should not be ashamed or not so proud of our athletes, because white stereotypes say that black people can be athletes. I am still proud of Muhammed Ali and Linford Christie, and all those people. I think that as black film-makers become more free then they will start to do things the right way round. That will be really exciting".

Part of what is liberating about Onwurah's own sense of achievement is the generosity with which her directorial freedom is shared. This is realized, for example, and despite the very personal autobiographical subject matter of her films, by the way in which she casually slips "we" into conversation about her work. The "we" refers to her family and her crew, who are often the same thing. It will remain to be seen how the personality that energizes her narratives - the voice that guides the images along - will be positioned in the more industrial context of feature film production. It is an open question, too, as to how the different demands of professional co-workers and audiences will be met.





"When you get on set, so much is instinctive with what you do. Say, in Terrordome, it follows the story of a black woman and a white woman in one day in the Terrordome. I don't think I treated the actors any different, although I do think I was a bit sloppy towards my male characters, both black and white. I was, perhaps, not so thorough with them as I was with my female characters. But that is just an experience. I think I will learn from that, and it won't be so different next time. There are in-jokes you can crack with black actors that you cannot crack with white actors. But they get used to it as well, because one thing on a black set is that things are noisier and sometimes more jokier. Sometimes, it is more the crew who have problems, because sparks are sparks, gaffers are gaffers, and grips are grips, and, suddenly, they are in this environment. That can take a bit of getting used to!".

"There are basically two reactions to *Terrordome*. They either love it or they hate it. It is actually that extreme. *Terrordome* is very violent, and there seems to have been a lot of response to that. The response seems to divide into two camps. We showed it in Los Angeles, where there was this cross-sectional audience, and we had a lot of people from Compton and South Central there. They were just standing up and shouting, "But that's the way it is. If you don't like violence in the film, then why don't you do something about the violence that is really happening?". And then you had the other people on the other side who were saying, "Violence perpetuates negative imagery". Blah Blah Blah. That is a debate that is really getting to me"

"I don't understand why people are so concerned with violence in the movies and seem not to be so concerned about violence in the real world. They spend more of their energies criticizing violence in the movies. I mean, my movies will always be explicit because I think that, as a black woman, what has happened historically to my people and my sex has never been seen - slavery has just become this mythical era. I want to really spell it out and show it in my films".

"If you show *Terrordome* or a violent movie in Nigeria people won't go out and kill. It is more to do with the society. It is the relationship between what goes on in society and what goes on in movies and in books. I think it is different in America. If I lived here, and had all that nervousness about where you can and can't go, and the guns, and listening to the news, I might feel differently. Did you hear about the James Bulger case in Britain (when a small child was abducted and murdered by two 11-year-old boys in Liverpool) when they started to say it was caused by the horror video *Child's Play 3?* You could show that to an entire school of children in Nigeria and no child would then go out and stone a kid to death. It is something about

what is already sick in the society. A lot of women said things about my using women's bodies in *The Body Beautiful*, but I just don't see how I am going to tell a lot of women's stories if I can't have freedom to do what I want in my movies. Especially in America. The politically correct debate in America has just gone stupid. I saw in the bookshop there is even a book called "Politically Correct Bedtime Stories!".

Although that was the end of our short interview, those last words of Ngozi Onwurah's make for apt closing thoughts as they seem to bring together so many of the key themes of her films: childhood, race, politics, border-crossings. I consider it a mark of their unique quality that her ideas stayed in my mind, raising questions and planting doubts, long after Onwurah left town and I stopped doing my research. Now, I suppose, I have the liberty of reflecting back on some of the reservations I have about her three short films. However, I sincerely hope and expect that her future output will force me to seriously and urgently re-evaluate what I am about to say.

Onwurah's first film takes its title from an eponymous pop hit of the 1960s, a song that celebrates that great fantasy of multiracial assimilation - a society given to breeding "coffee colored children by the score". It then proceeds to skillfully turn such rhetoric on its head as it resists the idea of mixed-race people being the great torch-bearers of humanity. Unlike her surrogate 11 year-old in the film, who proclaims "When I grow up I want to be white", the filmmaker now pledges her allegiance to black identity. Yet while her voice-over controversially proclaims how the man she loves may be white but the father of her child will be black, the effect of seeing Coffee Colored Children back-to-back with the other two films is to perceive a sharp contradiction within such an approach to maternity and paternity.

If Coffee Colored Children poignantly suggests how a mixed race family can be torn apart by internal divisions, what is so moving about the "we" of her interviews is the experience that lies behind it - the quiet knowledge that a family can still be reconstituted along better, mutually more supportive lines. But what kind of a family? At the time of the Nigerian civil war, Onwurah's father sent his bride and children to England, probably not expecting that they would soon be called "monkeys" and have dog shit shoved through their front door. The first film, like the children, stays at home with mother, so as to illustrate the cruelties of that English context. The preoccupation with motherlove then gets extended into the powerful and moving images of The Body Beautiful, while, in And Still I Rise, the daughter's love for Madge is subsumed under love for the Motherland, for Africa. At the same time, the

father-figure makes a symbolic appearance in the former film, only to disappear totally from the latter.

This last observation is, in itself, probably of no great importance (and it seems to me that the people who ask where the black men are in these films really miss the point). What is of more interest is not just the films' stridently woman-identified tone, but the contradictions they address within a subject of relevance to feminist cultural political film concerns. If the dialogical nature of Onwurah's style is both multivocal, but also very directly addressed to the mother (i.e. Madge, Africa), and if this ties in with recent feminist film work on the female voice in avant-garde and commercial cinema⁷, the choice of mother-love object is still somewhat inconsistent and problematic.

The question somebody in Bloomington asked of Coffee Colored Children, and the question that is at the back of the scenes of a white English woman cleaning shit off the wall as a victim of racism in Newcastle, is, "How did that mother get on in Africa?". The film does not make that leap into empathy, a leap made, for example, by another recent film of the (Asian) diaspora, Ann Hui's Song Of The Exile (Taiwan, 1989). In Hui's film, Maggie Cheung plays a young Chinese woman who returns to her family in Hong Kong after earning an MA in media production in London. She and her mother have difficulties getting along, but the problems begin to get resolved once the daughter is told by her father that her mother is actually Japanese - that is to say, that the mother alienatingly married into a Chinese family. The daughter learns more of the Mother's isolation, comes to identify her exiled consciousness with her own (both as a Chinese student in London in the 1970s, and, by extension, with regard to Hong Kong's situation vis a vis 1997), and learns to accept her strange behavior and cultural otherness.

On the one hand, Ngozi Onwurah's work is celebratory of the totality of the mother-daughter bond; it takes a clear look at the mother's body, the daughter's body, and the necessary relations between the two. On the other hand, for all this identification and commitment, it would appear that there is little identification with Madge's earlier life in Africa. Now, once again, there is no reason why there should be any such identification, except that raising that earlier memory would probably fracture the alliances upon which the three films, as a group, are constructed.

Devon Hodges and Janice L. Doane are among the writers who have expressed reservations about a certain feminist tendency to overinvest in the Pre-Oedipal stage of development, as if it could magically answer all the undesirabilities of the patriarchal system. "Acknowledging that the mother's degraded status is intimately connected to the child's accession to the

Law of the Father in the oedipal moment", they write, "recent psychoanalytic feminism has focused upon the shadowy preoedipal period, that stage of development linked to the mother and often to feminine development and desire. Yet this interpretive project dedicated to elevating the importance of the mother is frequently lured into the trap of positing an originary moment, more primal and real than the oedipal stage, that seems to promise a solution to oppressive constructions of sexual difference"8.

The Body Beautiful is genuinely radical and challenging in both asserting, more than any other film I am aware of, the emotional and tactile ties of this preoedipal bond ("When she pulled me towards her", the teenage daughter observes, "I could count her eyelashes"), while then potentially throwing that bond back in the viewer's face through the visualization of a real-life mastectomy. At the same time, it begins the process of eliding sexual and familial difference with racial difference.

Later in the film, when the large, ideal black man starts to make love with Madge, Africa is recalled. Yet if, according to And Still I Rise, Africa is the pre-Oedipal, the spiritual home, the Motherland, can Madge, as a white woman, also be an African mother? There are two sides to this question. Firstly, and paradoxically, the empathy displayed in so many other ways in the three films cannot stretch as far as the empathy achieved by Hui in Song Of The Exile, but works instead by a fascinating displacement of the Pre Oedipal - namely, away from the physical mother and onto the African soil itself. (And whereas Onwurah relies largely on the grain of the female voice to direct the viewer's attention, Hui relies more on color and composition. She also has the professional advantage of Maggie Cheung's dove's eyes; it will be interesting to see whether Onwurah finds such a good actor to express her similar themes through).

Secondly, the memory of Africa is then remembered (through the mother) as a memory of a man. If the mother is to be reclaimed and loved, what knowledge will that reveal about her situation in patriarchal Nigeria? Isn't the image of a beautiful black man making love with her in *The Body Beautiful* also a memory of an African Fatherland, a memory that *And Still I*

⁷ See, for example, Kaja Silverman, The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice In Psychoanalysis And Cinema (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988), and Amy Lawrence, Echo And Narcissus: Women's Voices In Classical Hollywood Cinema. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991).

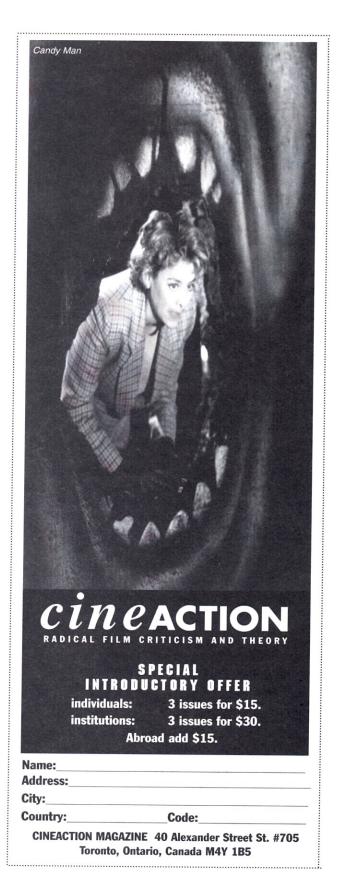
⁸ Devon Hodges and Janice L. Doane, "Undoing Feminism in Anne Rice's Vampire Chronicles", in James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger (eds.), *Modernity and Mass Culture* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 158.

Rise everywhere denies and rejects? Here, again, the comparison of Onwurah's work with The Song Of Exile is productive. Hui's film represents the kind of woman-centred Hong Kong narrative that sees the return to China in 1997 as a return to a "Motherland", and yet, looking through a recent collection of pieces on the New Chinese Cinema, one finds a key article entitled "The Return of the Father: Hong Kong New Wave and its Chinese Context in the 1980s9. Questions of linguistic specificity aside, such a contradiction in the naming of core identities suggests to me that even very woman-identified, pre-Oedipal relations and communities might still be inscribed within, and serve, an ostensibly patriarchal system.

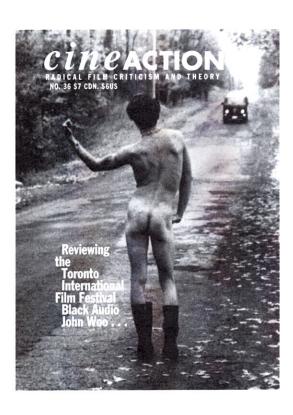
That possibility is part of the baggage that Onwurah's films have not yet concerned themselves with, but the possibility that there is a lot more baggage yet to unpack is part of the critical context they actively seek to achieve. It is to be hoped that, with the release of Terrordome, Onwurah can keep her freedom and carve out a space for herself, so that the important issues she raises can be broadened out for wider debate. (Her work is very suggestive, for example, in terms of questions about ethnic spectatorship, a subject which, as a white Englishman, I should have discussed more here). One of the most memorable images from And Still I Rise is of a lone black woman walking towards the camera and against the tide of white commuters trudging through the London rush-hour. Ngozi Onwurah may just come to achieve such grace and ease of movement in the commercial market-place. That is to say, she may possess the wherewithal to swim and keep her mouth open at the same time.

I would like to thank Gloria Gibson-Hudson for arranging this interview, and Ngozi Onwurah for generously giving of her time during her short visit to Bloomington.

⁹ Li Cheuk-To, "The Return of the Father: Hong Kong New Wave and its Chinese Context in the 1980s", in Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack and Esther Yau (eds.), *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 160-179.



cineaction



TO
ORDER
BACK
ISSUES use
the insert card

- 1 Neglected Films of the 80's
- 2 Women in contemporary Hollywood
- 3/4 Reading the text (double issue)
- 5 Alternative Cinema
- 6 Scorsese (sold out)
- 7 Stars (sold out)
- 8 Revaluation
- 9 Comedy
- 10 Sex (sold out)
- 11 Godard (sold out)
- 12 Teen Films
- 13 /14 Film Noir (double issue)
- 15 Interpretation
- 16 Canadian Cinema

- 17 Re:Positioning
- 18 Imperialism and Film
- 19/20 Critical Issues (double issue)
- 21/22 Rethinking Authorship (double issue)
- 23 Documentary: theory and politics
- 24/25 Feminist Film Theory/Criticism (double issue)
- **26/27** Melodrama and the Female Star (double issue)
- 28 Canadas: cinema and criticism
- 29 Revaluation: Hollywood
- 30 Framing the Family
- 31 Narrative and Film
- 32 Race-ing Home: Race and Cultural Identities
- 33 Screening the New World Order
- 34 Modernism
- 35 Gays and Hollywood, Queer Cinema
- 36 Toronto International Film Festival; Black Audio: John Woo

FUTURE ISSUES

38 Murder in America:

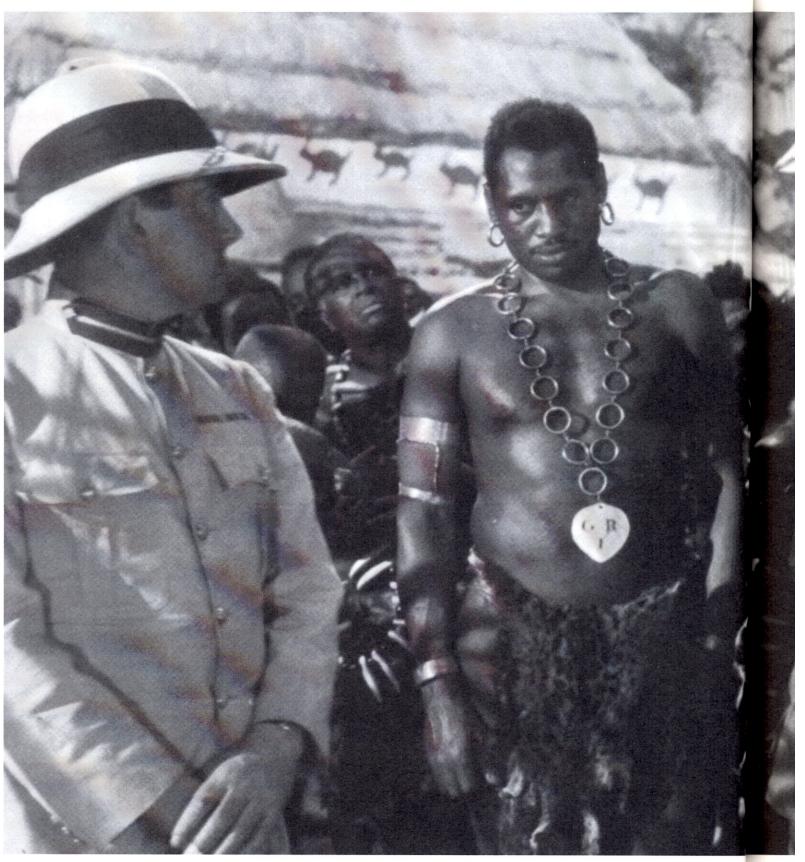
Trends and historical aspects of the American take on death and violence.

39 Re-Readings:

Films of the past reconsidered.

A Spike Lee dossier. [submissions welcome]

The Politics of Cultural Conversion



in Colonialist African Cinema

Lesley Banks and Paul Robeson in Sanders of the River

by Femi Okiremuete Shaka

For some time now, the cinematic practices of → Africa have often been assessed as a unified cinematic practice - one which was essentially colonialist. Historians and critics of African cinema have often overlooked the need to make a distinction between the two divergent cinematic practices, colonial African instructional cinema and colonialist African cinema, which existed side by side during the colonial era. Colonial African instructional cinema was a governmental and non-governmental agency sponsored cinema that treats the medium essentially as a vehicle for social mobilisation and public education. In most of its productions, the medium is used as a vehicle for teaching Africans modern methods of agriculture, medication, banking, taxation, personal hygiene, urban planning and development, youth mobilisation, community self-help schemes, etc. The films do not represent Africans as lacking knowledge of these things; rather, they represent them as doing things in the old-fashioned traditional ways. The emphasis therefore is on using the medium as an aid to the process of modernisation. On the other hand, colonialist African cinema was/is sponsored essentially by private commercial interests, and it lays claim to Africa through representation of colonialist conventionalised stereotypes of Africans in European culture.

Thus the lack of any systematically argued critical criteria or theoretical propositions for qualifying a film as African or otherwise meant that the criticism of African cinema has often been silent, and has neglected several important issues necessary for a proper appraisal of the field. It is not the objective of this study to propose a theoretical framework for the criticism of post–colonial African cinema. By properly distinguishing between the two types of Colonial cinematic practices, and by further comparing both practices with contemporary African cinematic practices, the roots of current practices will not only be formally established, but their distinctive features will also become apparent. In essence, I will try to define the various practices that preceded contemporary African cinema.

I have attempted to map out some of the methodological problems plaguing the criticism of African cinema, as well as to provide the critical criteria for distinguishing between the two types of cinematic traditions. I have also examined the historical background of colonialist African cinema and undertaken an analysis of Zoltan Korda's Sanders of the River as a case study of cinematic practice.

Certain terms require definition. By colonialist African discourse/cinema, I mean both continental and diasporic European representations of Africans that use European metaphysical concepts, its moral values, ethics and aesthetics, to judge through representation those of Africa as inferior imitations or types of European originals. I will be using the term "colonialist" to qualify and distinguish this mode of discourse in order to avoid generalisations that would otherwise give the wrong impression that all European representations of Africa and Africans are colonialist. Above all, I am using the term "African" to qualify the African experience in colonialist discourse in general. This is the sense in which I will be using terms such as colonialist African discourse, colonialist African literature and colonialist African cinema.

Methodological Problems in the Criticism of Colonialist African Cinema

The study of colonialist African cinema, unlike colonialist African literature, upon which the majority of its texts are based, has remained a neglected area in African film scholarship. Studies that have been carried out on the representation of Africans in cinema deal essentially with the images of African-Americans in American cinema. Studies such as those carried out by Noble (1948), Mapp (1972), Bogle (1974), Leab (1975), Cripps (1977), Nesteby (1982) etc., deal only tangentially with Africa by virtue of the African origin of African-Americans. The only exception in this regard is Richard Maynard's work, Africa on Film, Myth and Reality. However this collection of essays by historians, anthropologists, and journalists, pursues arguments that seem to equate representation with reality. Stam and Spence have questioned the validity of such a methodological approach to colonialist filmic studies: these studies of filmic colonialism and racism tend to focus on certain dimensions of film - social portraval, plot and character. While posing legitimate questions concerning narrative plausibility and mimetic accuracy, negative stereotypes and positive images, the emphasis on realism has often betrayed an exaggerated faith in the possibilities of verisimilitude in art in general and the cinema in particular, avoiding the fact that films are inevitably constructs, fabrications, representations. 1

In spite of the issue raised by Stam and Spence, I should stress that the essential argument pursued in the works, the rejection of black stereotypical images in Euro–American scholarly and filmic practice, is not what is being questioned. While it is true that black film historians and critics often pursue arguments that seem to equate representations of blacks with blacks, one should not forget that the representations in disputation are not black representations but European stereotypical representations of blacks. And so, what is being questioned about the validity of the methodological approach is not the question of incorrectness in rejection of black stereotypical images. I will return to the issue of methodological approach in colonialist African cinema shortly.

On the question of approach to the study of representation of Africans in Euro-American cinema, it is imperative that such studies proceed from an awareness of the African–American experience of the practice, being the first people of African origin to be represented on cinema. Although most of the principal categories of stereotypes of blacks tabulated by Lawrence Reddick, which Peter Noble cites in his work, include modes that have been applied in the representation of Africans, Euro–American scholarly and filmic practices had specific modes of stereotypification applied in the representation of continental Africans.² What unites the African and African–American experience is commonality of African descent.

The reason advanced for the non-distinction between colonial African instructional cinema and colonialist African cinema is the often quoted views of its organisers, whose recommendation of instructional cinema for Africa is based on the colonialist reasoning that Africans are incapable of grasping complex cinematic narratives and of distinguishing between truth and falsehood. These views are exemplified in the following arguments of Notcutt and Latham:

Yet surely reflection will convince any unprejudiced person that, with backward peoples unable to distinguish between truth and falsehood, it is surely our wisdom, if not our obvious duty, to prevent, so far as is possible, the dissemination of wrong ideas. Should we stand by and see a distorted presentation of the life of the white races accepted by millions of Africans when we have it in our power to show them the truth? There is much that is silly and sordid in the life of the West, but white people have other interests than money—making, gambling, crime and the pursuit of other people's wives and husbands...³

The Belgian colonial government in the Congo (now the Republic of Zaire) expressed views similar to those of British counterparts. But its views were much more systematically encoded into laws regulating the practice of cinema. In 1936, a series of laws were introduced forbidding unauthorized filmmakers from filming in the territory. This was followed by another law passed in 1945 forbidding anyone to "admit to movie theatres, public or private, people other than from the European and Asian races." In addition, Pierre Piron, the director of the General Secretariat of the Belgian Congo is quoted as observing that

the study of the reaction of the Congolese spectators, supported by similar studies undertaken in neighbouring territories, leads to a disappointing observation: the African is, in general, not mature enough for cinema. Cinematographic conventions disrupt him; psychological nuances escape him; rapid succession of sequences submerge him.⁵

Historians and critics of African cinema such as Diawara⁶, Mgbejume⁷, Malkmus and Armes⁸ have cited the aforementioned administrative views of the sponsors

and practitioners of colonial African instructional cinema, and concluded, often without seeing the films, that they were not different from those of colonialist African cinema. But in fact, colonial African instructional cinema was essentially a cinema born of the desire to use the medium as a vehicle for instruction, social mobilisation and community development efforts. In this respect, the way in which African subjectivity and culture are constructed in the films of Bantu Educational Cinema Experiment and similar projects inspired by this pioneer effort, such as those of the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) of the British colonial government, the Film and Photo Bureau, and the Centre for Catholic Action Cinema (CCAC) of the Belgian Congo, is different from that of colonialist African cinema. In colonial African instructional cinema, Africans are constructed as knowing and knowledgeable people, able and eager to learn modern methods of social organization and development for the benefit of their communities. Africans form the centre of attraction in these films, and they are usually engaged in the execution of one project or the other in the process of social transformation. This is in contrast to colonialist African cinema, in which Africans are constructed as savage and bestial people always on the verge of slipping into barbarism in the slightest absence of colonial authority.

African film scholarship is also somewhat lopsided in favour of the history of the film industry at the expense of textual analysis. When textual analyses are attempted, the specificity of the medium is often overlooked. The result is that the emphasis on narrative, with little attention paid to the cinematic codes of narration, make such studies appear indistinguishable from literary criticism. For instance, while paying particular attention to characterization, plot, socio-historical and cultural issues, they often neglect codes of narration made manifest through character point-of-view, flashbacks, reflections, etc., and the significance of such codes to narrative authority or the concepts of subjectivity, race, ethnicity, and gender.

Historical studies carried out thus far on the film industry in Africa include those by Opubor and Nwuneli (1979), Martin (1982), Gabriel (1983), Boughedir (1987), Bachy (1987), Ekwuazi (1987), Balogun (1987), Mgbejume (1989) and Diawara (1992). While these historical studies have been helpful in shedding light on the problems of the film industry in Africa, they have nevertheless overlooked the very specialised nature of the industry - that in addition to being an artistic industry, cinema is also a product of an industrialised economy, and that its organisational infrastructures and personnel are as specialised as any other sector of an industrialised economy.

Though these historical studies emphasis how patterns of colonial and post-colonial state sponsorship and the monopolistic and hegemonic influences of European and American film distribution conglomerates have affected the development of the film industry in Africa, by overlooking both the industrial and artistically specialised nature of cinema they give one the impression that setting up a film industry is like setting up a factory to produce

bricks or toiletries. If it were that easy, then Nigeria, Ghana and Burkina Faso, three West African countries with film laboratories, would have been self-sufficient in film production by now. The fact is that to build a viable film industry, in addition to film laboratories, a country requires production companies and film studios, distribution companies and exhibition theatres, trained manpower comprising producers, directors, writers, actors and actresses, cinematographers, sound engineers and production recordists, light designers and technicians, editors, production and costume designers, stunt personnel etc. The industry must be profitable enough to attract the unwavering patronage of both the financial and advertising sub-sectors of the national economy. Such viability in turn requires the patronage of a willing ticket-purchasing cinema audience. Finally, such a country should possess both the geo-political and economic muscle to ensure the international competitiveness of its national film industry.9

Thus, instead of assessing the problems of the film industry in Africa in terms of the general gross underdevelopment of the continent historians and critics of the film industry find a ready scapegoat in the erstwhile colonial authorities who, we are made to understand, conspired to let the industry remain underdeveloped. 10 To analyze the film industry in this manner is to fail to see it globally in both its geo-political and economic terms, as an internationally competitive industry dominated by Hollywood film practice, with European and other national cinemas adopting creative policies for the survival of their national cinemas.¹¹ Higson particularly foregrounds the political and economic imperatives at play in the construction of

Introduction (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company,

1976), pp. 3-25

¹ Robert Stam and Louise Spence, "Colonialism, Racism and Representation: An Introduction," Screen (Vol.24, No.2, March-April 1983), p. 3.

² Peter Noble, The Negro in Films (London: Robinson, 1948), pp. 11-12.

³ L.A. Notcutt and G.C. Latham, The African and the Cinema (London: The Edinburg House Press, 1937), pp. 22-23.

⁴ Cited in Manthia Diawara, "Sub-Saharan Film Production: Technological Paternalism," Jump Cut (No. 32, April 1986), p. 64. ⁵ Ibid., p. 64.

⁶ Ibid, p. 62, (1992) p. 12.

Onyero Mgbejume, Film in Nigeria: Development, Problems and Promise (Nairobi: African Council on Communication Education, 1989), pp. 1-4.

⁸ Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes, Arab and African Film Making (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1992), pp. 16-22. ⁹ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, Film Art: An

¹⁰ Manthia Diawara, "Sub-Saharan Film Production: Technological Paternalism," Jump Cut (No. 32, April 1986). 11 Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," Screen (Vol. 30, No. 4, 1989). Richard Dyer and Ginette Vicendeau, Popular European Cinema (London: Routledge, 1992). Stephen Crofts, "Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s," Quarterly Review of Film & Video (Vol. 14 (3), 1993).



national identities through national cinemas when he argues that:

to identify a national cinema is first of all to specify a coherence and a unity; it is to proclaim a unique identity and a stable set of meanings. The process of identification is thus invariably a hegemonising, mythologising process, involving both the production and assignation of a particular set of meanings, and attempts to contain, or prevent, the potential proliferation of other meanings. At the same time, the concept of a national cinema has almost invariably been mobilised as a strategy of cultural (and economic) resistance, a means of asserting national autonomy in the face of (usually) Hollywood's international domination. ¹²

From Higson's theorisation of the concept of national cinemas and identity construction, it is clear that the concept is much more complex than most historians and critics of African cinema have conceived it. Stephen Crofts, in his reassessment of the notion of national cinema since the publication of Higson's essay, has tabulated seven categories that operate in terms of an agenda set by Hollywood:

the political, economic and cultural regimes of different nation-states licence some seven varieties of "national cinemas" sequenced in rough order of decreasing familiarity... (1) cinemas which differ from Hollywood, but do not compete directly, by targeting a distinct, specialist market sector; (2) those which differ, do not compete directly but do directly critique Hollywood; (3) European and Third World entertainment cinemas which struggle with limited or no success; (4) cinemas which ignore Hollywood, an accomplishment managed by few; (5) anglophone cinemas which try to beat Hollywood at its own game; (6) cinemas which work within a wholly state-controlled and often substantially state-subsidized industry; and, (7) regional or national cinemas whose culture and/or language take their distance from the nation-state which enclose them. 13

While conceding the overlapping nature of several of the categories, Crofts however highlights the geo-political, cultural and economic complexities which underly the concept, and the strategies which individual nations or even ethnic groups or regions within the same nation have adopted in response to the hegemonic domination of world cinema by Hollywood. What particularly stands out in his article is the fact that every nation, with the exception of the United States of America, is engaged in survival strategies aimed at preserving their national cinemas against the economic and cultural onslaught of Hollywood.

In a situation where both former colonial powers and

their erstwhile colonies are engaged in the same fight for the survival or development of their national cinemas, it is naive to expect that the former colonial powers in Africa would help to develop the film industry in Africa when the reality suggests that they need the African market, assuming they can wrestle it from the firm grip of Hollywood, to shore up their national cinemas. What most of the theoreticians and historians of African cinema fail to acknowledge is that pleas for the transfer of industrial technologies, either cinematic or otherwise, from Europe or elsewhere to Africa are futile exercises. It is like begging a neighbourhood shop owner to assist you in setting up a competing shop on his street. To put an end to the embarrassment of such exercises, governments on the continent should follow the examples of other developing economies by setting up agencies for the funding of independent film producers, protecting and financing their national cinemas through control of film distribution and building of movie theatres in both urban and rural areas, especially in those countries where indigenous businessmen have shown no interest in developing the cinema sub-sector of the national economy.

In countries where indigenous and/or foreign businessmen and women already own or manage movie theatres, they should be made to include all locally produced films in their programmes, and the films should be shown within a potential time schedule when they are most likely to attract audiences, and the price of tickets should not exceed those charged for foreign films. If movie theatres sustain losses from showing locally produced films, such losses should be deducted from their annual taxes to the state. Finally, African countries should use import duties charged on foreign films to finance "independent" indigenous filmmakers until their economies are industrialised enough for them to enter into industrial film production for the competitive commercial film market.

The only exception to the aforementioned tradition in African film scholarship are auteurist critical studies of African filmmakers in which biographical information outweighs textual analysis, and the latter is restricted to analysis of film narrative, characterization, plot, socio—history and culture, with little attention paid to the specificity of filmic narration, as in the case of studies by Françoise Pfaff. Though Malkmus and Armes's recent work is a welcome departure from the usual preoccupation with historical studies of the film industry or auteurist critical studies, it however fails to address, in a systematic manner, the object of study, African film. The deficiencies noticeable in the work can be traced to lack of a well-elaborated

¹² Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screen* (Vol. 30, No. 4, 1989), p. 37.

¹³ Stephen Crofts, "Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s," Quarterly Review of Film & Video (Vol. 14 (3), 1993), p. 50.

¹⁴ Françoise Pfaff, The Cinema of Ousmane Sembene: A Pioneer of African Film (Westport: Praeger/Greenwood Press, 1984). Françoise Pfaff, Twenty—five Black African Filmmakers (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

theoretical framework. For instance, no criteria are given for what qualifies to be referred to as African cinema and the nature of its narrative and production styles. Furthermore, the question of the assumed universal neutrality of the cinematic medium vis-à-vis disputations surrounding such assumptions, and what their implications are for film practice in Africa, is not addressed. Nor is the issue of point-of-view in the cinema as it affects the concepts of subjectivity and identity construction, class, gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, etc., and spectatorial textual positioning addressed. In addition, as in earlier studies of African cinema, the issue of the cinematic practices of colonial Africa is not fully explored. ¹⁵

Even though Malkmus and Armes's group films such as Alexander Korda's Sanders of the River (1935) and Jacques de Baroncelli's L' Homme du Niger (1939), under European fictional films set in Africa, and though they reserve a sub-heading for the films of the colonial Film Units, no distinction is made between colonialist African cinema, the category to which Korda and Baroncelli's cited films belong, and colonial African instructional cinema, to which films such as Alexander Shaw's Men of Africa (1939) and Terry Bishop's Daybreak in Udi (1948) belong.

The themes of community self-help and modern methods of social adaptation exploited in both Men in Africa and Daybreak in Udi, to cite just two examples, do not place them in the same category as colonialist African films. Both films are social documentaries in the tradition of Grierson, and the emphasis on stereotypification that one comes across in colonialist African cinema is not the case in these films. For instance, though Daybreak in Udi is a dramatised social documentary, the main African characters (the only European character being Chadwick, the District Commissioner) are not the caricatured stereotypes of Africans that one finds in colonialist African cinema. Rather, representation in this film adheres to the tradition of social documentary in which villagers are seen engaged in mass literacy campaigns and self-help community development.

In contrast to the conventions of colonialist African cinema where traditional rulers are represented as arch-rivals and villains to colonial administration, in colonial African instructional cinema, and specifically in both Men of Africa and Daybreak in Udi, traditional rulers are represented as partners and the people as capable of social progress. The people themselves are represented as enthusiasts of social advancement once it becomes clear to them that the white man's modern methods of social development are much more effective than the traditional ways of doing things. In Daybreak in Udi, for instance, both men and women, boys and girls, young and old alike, embrace mass literacy campaigns and community self-help development. Though the film is built around the objections of a member of the council of elders to the proposed maternity project, these objections are represented as deriving from fear of social change by Eze, a member of the council, and such individualist spoilers are not lacking in contemporary African communities. As depicted in the film, the collective will of the people often neutralises the individual crusades of such people.

I have made this methodological detour in order to arrive at the main subject matter, colonialist African cinema, partly because its study raises several questions, all bordering on the proper definition of what qualifies as an African film. Also, because as a mode of discourse I consider colonialist African cinema as part of a larger body of discursive tradition in Euro-American scholarly and literary practices, which has a long history stretching as far back in time as the classical era. The second reason is the need to bring into focus the views of earlier theoreticians and historians of African cinema, some of which I disagree with, but also because I believe most of these earlier theoretical propositions and critical practices need updating in view of changing trends in film criticism in general since the intervention of feminist film critics, whose works have brought into focus the role and image of women in cinema and the debates they have been inspiring.¹⁶ Using a combination of Freudian psychoanalytic and semiotic methods, Mulvey argues in her principal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" that

woman... stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. ¹⁷

The essay then goes on to analyze the various narrative techniques employed by the cinema to set up women as objects of male visual pleasure. Since the publication of that essay, feminist film criticism has witnessed several changes due to the intervention of black feminist critics like bell hooks, who accused white feminist critics of adopting the same universal categories and analytical concepts of their male counterparts, which occludes the issue of race and class among women and, Bobo¹⁸ who accused black males of trying to legislate the aesthetic tastes of black women. On the racial and class question, for instance, hooks argues that

white women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women's reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group. Nor are they aware of the extent to which their perspective reflects race and class biases, although there has been a great awareness of biases in recent years. Racism abounds in the writings of white feminists, reinforcing white supremacy and negating the possibility that women will bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries. Past feminist refusal to draw attention to and attrack racial hierarchies suppressed the link between race and class. ¹⁹

In view of these developments in film criticism, we cannot

pretend to be untouched by the issues raised in the ongoing debates. The issues are not only relevant, they are, in fact, imperative for the reappraisal of critical perspectives on African cinema in general and colonialist African cinema in particular. Furthermore, I do not subscribe to the blanket qualification of the whole cinematic practices of colonial Africa as colonialist.

Studies in colonialist discourse have, however, shown that is not a unified body of discourse. ²⁰ Rather, colonialist discourse has been shown to be plagued by textual gaps and silences which have been interpreted as presences of native counter–narratives, presences whose silence are vocal enough to undermine the authority of colonialist texts. In addition, the agonizing influence of the Imaginary psychical phase of miscognition, in both the conception and the representation of the Other, means that discourse is often caught in the boundary between fixed and variable definitions of the Other. As Jan Mohamed puts it:

In the Imaginary text, the subject is eclipsed by his fixation on and fetishization of the Other: the self becomes a prisoner of the projected image. Even though the native is negated by the projection of the inverted image, his presence as an absence can never be cancelled. Thus the colonialist desire only entraps him in the dualism of the "imaginary" and ferments a violent hatred of the native.²¹

Todorov, in his work, The Conquest of America, has demonstrated how European images of internal Otherness were projected upon American Indians. According to him, various categories of Otherness exist in every society: "other in relation to myself, to me; or else as a specific social group to which we do not belong. This group in turn can be interior to society: women for men, the rich for the poor; the mad in the eyes of the normal; or it can be exterior to society, i.e., another society which will be near or far away depending on the case; beings whom everything links to me on the cultural, moral, historical plane; or else unknown quantities, outsiders whose language and customs I do not understand, so foreign that in extreme instances I am reluctant to admit they belong to the same species as my own."22 In the case of the encounter between Europeans and American Indians, the American Indian Other was not only external to the European, but their Otherness was also marked by colour, language, customs, etc. As we shall later discover in our examination of the modes of representation in colonialist African cinema, the same tradition of projection of European internal images of Otherness upon American Indians was also effected through European representation of Africans. The phenomenon of European social degeneration in Africa or the propensity for "going native" either by marrying a "native" woman or by identifying too closely with "natives" is often projected upon members of the European lower classes, especially men of working class background.

I should like to emphasize, however, that the underlying concept of fixity in colonialist African discourse is a product of the ambivalence of the politics of cultural conversion in colonialism. The project of colonialism is posited in colonialist African discourse as a civilizing mission. Yet in terms of its narrativisation, that civilizing mission is subverted through fixation of the native in his nativity. The native is perpetually caught in the boundary between progress and regression. In fact, stress is placed on the need for the perpetual presence of the colonialist to avoid the regression of the native into nativity. But by stressing the potentiality for native regression, the success of the whole project of colonialism is itself called into question since that success is forever dependent upon the presence of the colonialist.

In colonialist African discourse, the native is at once changeable and unchanging. Thus, on the one hand the native is changeable, but that changeability is tied to the perpetual presence of the colonialist; on the other hand, the native is unchangeable because of the very fragility of his cultural conversion. In addition, the acculturated native is despised for negating the "good" old ways of his people. But those same "good" old ways are represented as indices of barbarity and backwardness. The lesson to learn from the ambivalence of the politics of cultural conversion in colonialist African discourse is that it suits the colonialist to fixate the native through discursive practices within the framework of nativity. By fixating the native perpetually in the Imaginary, in psychoanalytic terms, his virtual cultural conversion is perpetually postponed and predicat-

¹⁵ Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes, *Arab and African Film Making* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1992), pp. 16–22.

¹⁶ Molly Haskell, From Reverence to Rape (New York: Penguin Books, 1974). Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen (Vol. 16, No. 3, Autumn 1975). bell hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre (Boston: South End Press, 1984).ctc.

¹⁷ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema *Screen*," (Vol. 16, No. 3, Autumn 1975), p. 7.

¹⁸ Jacqueline Bobo, "The Colour Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers," E. Deirdre Pribram (ed), Female Spectators (London: Verso, 1988).

¹⁹ bell hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre (Boston: South End Press, 1984), p. 3.

²⁰ Abdul R. JanMohamed, Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1983). Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," Critical Inquiry (Vol. 12, No. 1, Autumn 1985). Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question", Screen (Vol. 24, Nov–Dec 1983). Benita Parry, "Problems in Current theories of Colonial Discourse," Oxford Literary Review (Nos. 1–2, 1987).

 ²¹ Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist
 Literature," Critical Inquiry (Vol. 12, No. 1, Autumn 1985), p. 67.
 22 Tzvetan Todorov, The Conquest of America, trans.
 Richard Howard (New York: Harper Perenial, 1984), p. 3.

ed upon the presence of the colonialist. This fixation is thus a strategy for the justification of colonialism.

The Historical Background of Colonialist African Cinema

The roots of colonialist African cinema can be traced to colonialist African discourse in general and colonialist African literature in particular. Most of its texts are either adaptations from literary texts or personal memoirs of colonial administrators, missionaries, travellers, settlers, etc. This pattern is however not peculiar to Africa. Robert Stam and Louise Spence note that

colonialist representation did not begin with the cinema; it is rooted in a vast colonial intertext, a widely disseminated set of discursive practices. Long before the first racist images appeared on film screens of Europe and North America, the process of colonialist image–making, and resistance to that process, resonated through Western literature. Colonialist historians, speaking for the winners of history, exalted the colonial enterprise, at bottom little more than a gigantic act of pillage, whereby whole continents were bled of their human and material resources, as a philanthropic civilising mission, motivated by a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease and tyranny.²³

An earlier collection of essays on colonialist African cinema, edited by Richard A. Maynard, *Africa on Film: Myth and Reality*, has equally traced the roots of the cinematic practice to colonialist African literature²⁴, as has Jeffrey Richards, in his study of what he refers to as the Cinema of Empire, which includes many of the films I have classified under colonialist African cinema. Richards states that Hollywood's involvement in the practice was driven by two factors: "the desire for exotic and romantic escapism" and "the commercial factor." This perhaps explains the investments in the Tarzan series of films, the majority of which were set in Africa. Writing on the ideology of the Cinema of Empire, Richards observes that

what becomes immediately obvious when viewing these films is that, although they are made in the last decades of the Empire's existence, they do not reflect contemporary ideas about the Empire. The ideas they reflect are those of late nineteenth century.... The constitutional developments in the Empire in the inter–war years find no place in the cinema of Empire. In films, the Empire is unchanged and unchanging.²⁶

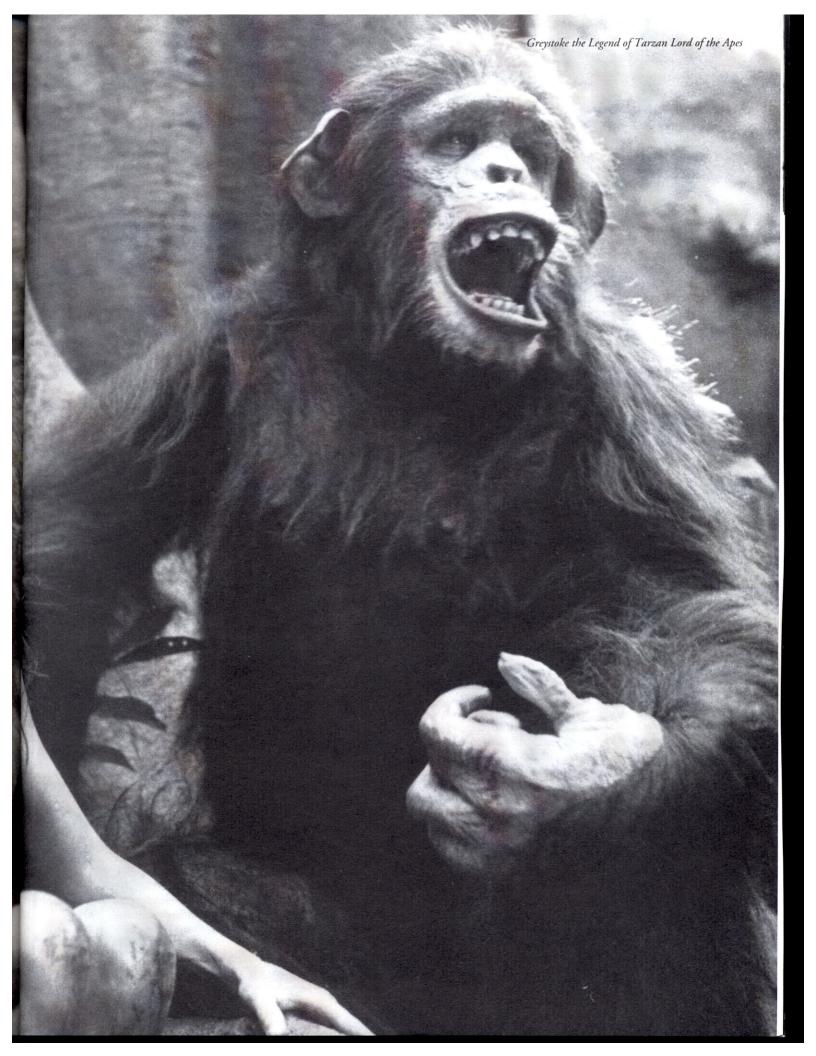
The prevalent ideas propagated in the nineteenth centu-

23 Robert Stam and Louise Spence, "Colonialism, Racism and Representation: An Introduction," *Screen* (Vol 24, No. 2, March–April 1983), p. 5.

26 Ibid., p. 7.



Richard A. Maynard (ed), Africa on Film: Myth and Reality (Rochell Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1974).
 Jeffrey Richards, Visions of Yesterday (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 3.



ry as they relate to Africa are racial theories aimed at proving the racial inferiority of Africans. The fallacy of such theories have since been the subject of many scholarly works.²⁷ But the fact that these racial theories were propagated by the cream of Euro– American scholarship for more than three centuries has left its mark. These same theories are the ones that informed and continue to inform colonialist African films.

In colonialist African cinema, people who are different, not only in culture but in skin colour and physical outlook, are denied their difference and are measured by European concepts of social organization, cultural practices and notions of aesthetics. Categories of cultural experience and physical outlook which mark out Africans as different from Europeans are cinematically highlighted not so much to acknowledge them as such but specifically to disavow such differences or use them as representative paradigms of perversions of European ideals. In essence, colonialist African discourse or its cinematic practice is an arrested form of knowledge and perception; it is a partial blindness that arises from the inability to see beyond oneself or one's cultural boundaries or the extension of one's cultural boundaries over others by means of physical force and discursive self-aggrandizement. Paul Bohanan has argued that "Africa was the Dark Continent, but the darkness had much more to do with the European and American visitors to it, and workers in it, than it had to do with Africans."28

The association of Africans with savagery and bestiality began with documentaries such as Tuaregs in Their Country (1909), Big Game Hunting in Africa (1909), Missionaries in Darkest Africa (1912), The Military Drill of the Kikuyu Tribes and Other Ceremonies (1914), and film shorts such as How a British Bull-dog Saved the Union Jack (1906), which deals with the British-Zulu war of 1906-1907, and D.W. Griffith's The Zulu Heart (1908), in which a Zulu turns on his fellows in order to aid the whites, etc. However, most film historians now cite Griffith's The Birth of a Nation (1915) as the film that codified the stereotypical images of blacks, in general, in the cinematic medium.²⁹ Though the film explores and exploits white fears and anxieties about the black presence in America, and in this respect, it can be considered as dealing specifically with an African-American experience in colonialist filmic representation, in the opening sequence the film traces the problem of the black presence to Africa and the slave trade. Through this association, metaphors of African savagery and bestiality are transposed to African-Americans and vice versa. With respect to Africa itself, the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs and the Tarzan series of films based upon them helped to canonise these metaphors of African savagery and bestiality. Brian Street draws similar conclusions with respect to his analysis of the novels of empire when he states that

Edgar Rice Burroughs, the inventor of Tarzan, for instance, helps to fix the notion for future generations of young readers that people like their ancestors may still be found in some for-

gotten jungles, dancing ape-like rituals in ways that European society has left behind. His florid jungle prose transforms the scientific theory of his day into vivid and memorable images.³⁰

Not only do colonialist films deny Africans their individual identities and social values, as in almost every other aspect of the unequal Afro–European relationship, but Africans are made victims of European psychic projections and fantasies. Africans are cinematically represented as sexual perverts, cannibals, sadists, despots, idlers, indolent, gutless, timid, superstitious, and barbarous. Just about any social practice which European and Hollywood film producers and directors consider uncivil is projected upon Africans. When they are not being portrayed as childish and harmless, they are depicted at the other extreme as heartless despots and sadistic murderers; when they are not gutless, they are portrayed as irrational and bloodthirsty warriors.

Broadly speaking, most colonialist African films can be categorised as melodramas. Melodrama has been defined variedly by various critics and theoreticians.³¹ The one thing that unites these varied definitions, however, is the centrality of opposing complex moral orders and social values. Rahill defines melodrama as

a form of dramatic composition in prose partaking of the nature of tragedy, comedy, pantomime, and spectacle, intended for a popular audience. Primarily concerned with situation and plot...a more or less fixed complement of stock characters, the most important of which are a suffering heroine or hero, a persecuting villain, and a benevolent comic. It is conventionally moral and humanitarian in point of view and sentimental and optimistic in temper, concluding its fable happily with virtue rewarded after many trials and vice punished. Characteristically, it offers elaborate scenic accessories and miscellaneous divertissements and introduces music freely, typically to underscore dramatic effects.32

He also states that from its roots in popular theatre in the late eighteenth century, the form was taken up by the popular novel and film and television, and that as its audience grew in sophistication, especially in the nineteenth century with the rise of the bourgeoisie, it adopted a much more subtle approach to characterization, the employment of music was curtailed and the extravagant embellishments in scenography were discarded. Heroes and heroines who were less than blameless, especially in love, began to emerge So too were villains who were more to be pitied than censured when all the evidence was in, even heroes who refused to fight. The unhappy ending also became common. He also states that melodrama in its dramaturgic apparatus of villain-heroine conflict, a persecution plot with a happy ending and a raisonneur, offers an almost perfect instrument for propaganda. During the nineteenth century, this instrument was pressed into the service of innumerable crusades: national patriotism, anticlericalism, abolition of slavery, prohibition, and even tax and prison reform.³³ With respect to film, Gledhill has offered one of the most comprehensive historical and theoretical studies of melodrama. In Gledhill's words, the term denotes a fictional or theatrical kind, a specific cinematic genre or a pervasive mode across popular culture; melodrama both overlaps and competes with realism and tragedy, maintaining complex historical relations with them.³⁴ She also states that

melodramatic desire crosses moral boundaries, producing villains who, even as the drama sides with the good, articulate opposing principles, with equal, if not greater, power. In so doing it accesses the underside of official rationales for reigning moral orders – that which social convention, psychic repression, political dogma cannot articulate. Thus whether melodrama takes its categories from Victorian morality or modern psychology, its enactment of the continuing struggle of good and evil forces running through social, political and psychic life draws into a public arena desires, fears, values and identities which lie beneath the surface of publicly acknowledged world.³⁵

Gledhill further argues that in film the form has grown from its preoccupation with the "realism" associated with the masculine sphere of actions and violence, to the woman's film, with its emphasis on talk rather than action. This generic shift has subsequently led to the empowerment of women within this genre.³⁶ With respect to colonialist African cinema, melodrama takes the form of the opposition, through comparative schema, of European and African subjectivities, culture and moral values, belief systems, and other institutional practices. The genre does not empower Africans. Rather, it represents them, like American Indians in the Western, as degenerate and barbaric people. Villainy is identified with Africans, just as virtue and moral uprightness is identified with Europeans. The only exceptions are the "good" African who collaborates with the European colonial authority or the degenerate working class European who fraternises with Africans. African counter-discourses emerge in these films mostly through the representations of violent confrontations between Europeans and Africans. Though these violent confrontations are represented as misguided and unwarranted savage attacks, since most of the films do not explain the rationale for the attacks, this silence can be interpreted as an admission of Africans' objection to European colonial authority.

From the above definitions, one can deduce the fact that melodrama is a complex generic form with various sub–genres and categories. However, within this broad category, colonialist African films constitute a genre by themselves, since they employ recognisably colonialist tropes of representation in their narrative structure, char-

acterization, spatio-temporal articulations, etc. What makes these films colonialist is the fact that they are constrained by colonialist thought. Thomas Sobchack has dwelt upon the various manners in which genre films become constrained by the conventions and thoughts underlying such forms. He observes that the genre film

is a classical mode in which imitation not of life but of conventions is of paramount importance... Though there may be some charm in the particular arrangement of formular variables in the most current example of a genre, the audience seeks the solid and familiar referents of that genre, expecting and usually receiving a large measure of the known as opposed to the novel. Elevated and removed from everyday life, freed from the straight–jacket of mere representationalism, genre films are pure emotional articulation, fictional constructs of the imagination, growing essentially out of group interests and values.³⁷

Though most colonialist African films belong to one

²⁷ V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (London: James Currey, 1988). Nancy Stephan, "Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science," in David Theo Goldberg (ed) *Anatomy of Racism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990). Michael Banton, *Racial Theories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

²⁸ Paul Bohanan, "The Myth and the Fact," in Richard Maynard (ed) Africa on Film: Myth and Reality (Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Company Inc., 1974), p. 2.

29 Jim Pines, Blacks in Films: A Survey of Racial Themes and Images in the American Film (London: Studio Vista, 1975), pp. 7–32. Daniel Leab, From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), pp. 23–57. Thomas Cripps, Slow Fade to Black: The Image of Blacks in American Films, 1900–1942 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 15. James Nesteby, Black Images in American Films, 1896–1954 (Lanham: University Press of America, 1982), pp. 27–57.

³⁰ Brian Street, "Reading the Novels of Empire: Race and Ideology in the Classic Tale of Adventure" in David Dabydeen (ed) *The Black Presence in English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 98.

³¹ Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (University Park & London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967). James L. Smith, *Melodrama* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1973). Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). Christine Gledhill (ed), *Home is Where the Heart Is* (London: BFI Publishing, 1987).

³² Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (University Park & London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), p. xiv. 33 *Ibid.*, pp. xv–xvi.

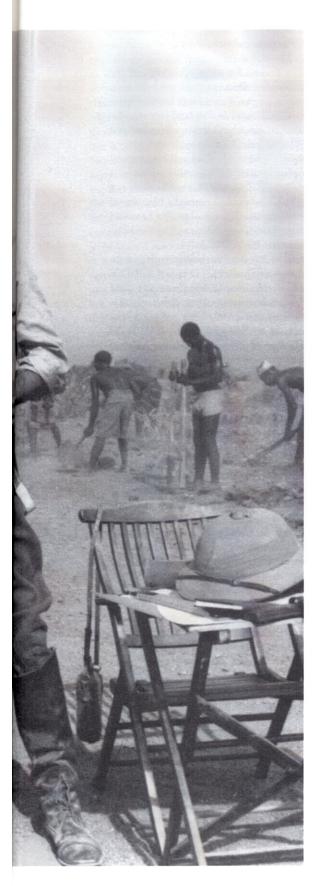
³⁴ Christine Gledhill (ed), *Home is Where the Heart Is* (London: BFI Publishing, 1987), p. 1.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

³⁷ Thomas Sobchack, "Genre Film: A Classical Experience," in Barry K. Grant (ed) *Film Genre: Theory and Criticism* (Methuchen, New Jersey & London: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1977), p. 52.





genre by virtue of the fact that they subscribe to colonialist thought, they do reflect additional sub–generic narrative and thematic contingencies that require distinction. While some like *Tarzan the Ape Man*, ³⁸ *King Solomon's Mines*, 39 *The African Queen*, ⁴⁰ or *Greystoke* ⁴¹ can be grouped under colonialist adventure films, others like *Sanders of the River* ⁴², *Men of Two Worlds* ⁴³, *Simba* ⁴⁴, *The Kitchen Toto* ⁴⁵, *Chocolat* ⁴⁶, or *Mister Johnson* ⁴⁷ can be categorised as colonial burden films because of the predominance of the theme of burden of colonial administration in them. *Simba* and *Kitchen Toto* can additionally be qualified as decolonisation conflict films or liberation struggle films, even though their British producers intended them to be adventure thrillers exploiting the violent milieu of the Mau Mau for dramatic effects. Other sub–genres include colonialist safari films, of which a most typical example is *Mogambo*, ⁴⁸ and colonialist autobiographical films.

Colonial Burden Films

Colonial burden films are essentially films that propagate the necessity for colonial rule. For this reason, many of them tend to rationalise colonialism through a derogatory portrayal of institutions that obstruct the free flow of the colonial system. Historically speaking, the greatest opposition to colonial rule prior to the emergence of Western educated nationalists, came from African traditional rulers. As a result of this, most of the films situated in this era tend to represent traditional African rulers as despotic and barbaric. Through this method of representation of the case for colonial presence, the films also paradoxically expose the fragility of the whole system because of the potential for the slippage of Africans into barbarism in the absence of colonial authority. The strategy is of course to rationalize colonial presence, but it is a strategy that also inadvertently exposes the fragility of colonial rule. Evidence of this textual pattern can be glimpsed from Sanders of the Rivers, Four Feathers, Old Bones of the River, Men of Two Worlds, Mister Johnson etc. This pattern will become clearer in my analysis of Sanders of the River.

A Critical Reading of Sanders of the River

Among the films that I have categorised as colonial burden films, Sanders of the River, Zoltan Korda's film version of Edgar Wallace's popular story book of the same title, can today be considered as a classic in the sub–genre. Sanders of the River was conceived by its producer, Alexander Korda, the director's elder brother, as part of an imperial trilogy that also include The Drum and The Four Feathers. Of the three films, one, The Drum, was set outside Africa, in India.

Most of the reputed success of Sanders of the River can be traced to the fact that it was one of the very first set of films in this sub–genre of colonialist African films to deal with such a historically relevant subject matter as the potential problems of an archetypal colonial administrator at a time when the British had commenced colonial administration in Africa. Its success can also be traced to the elaborate use of Yoruba artistic carvings as objects of

³⁸ W.S. Van Dyke, 1932.

³⁹ Robert Stevenson, 1937.

⁴⁰ John Huston, 1951.

⁴¹ Hugh Hudson, 1984.

⁴² Zoltan Korda, 1935.

⁴³ Thorold Dickson, 1946.

⁴⁴ Brian Desmond Hurst, 1955.

⁴⁵ Harry Hook, 1987.

⁴⁶ Claire Denis, 1988.

⁴⁷ Bruce Beresford, 1990.

⁴⁸ John Ford, 1953.

scenic decoration, both in Commissioner Sander's office in Mofalaba's court, and in Bosambo's private dwelling, and its use of erotic African fertility songs and dances in the sequence dealing with the marriage of Bosambo and Lilongo. All these combine to satisfy the entertainment needs of a broad spectrum of spectators. The film is reputed to have been so successful that after its 1935 exhibition it was re–issued in 1938, 1943 and 1947. A stage version, *The Sun Never Sets*, which also starred Leslie Banks,was inspired by the film. Paul Robeson's recording of the *Canoe Song* also became a hit record. ⁴⁹ Richards and Aldgate also state that the "box–office success of Sanders was such as to inspire Korda to produce *The Drum* (1938), set in India, and *The Four Feathers* (1939), set in Sudan. "50

The film begins with Commissioner Sanders (Leslie Banks), who has been peacefully ruling a set of communities on the estuaries of a river in West Africa for several years without leave, preparing to go on an annual leave to enable him to finalise his wedding plans. Commissioner Ferguson (Martin Walker) is sent to relieve him. But before he proceeds on leave, Bosambo (Paul Robeson), a Liberian ex- convict who has unofficially manipulated himself into position of chief of the Ochori, comes to seek official approval from Sanders. Sanders, playing the benevolent fatherly role, officially confers upon Bosambo the title of chief of the Ochori after chastising him for his naughty past behaviour. Immediately Sanders goes on leave, the gin and gun-runners, Farini (Marquis de Portago) and Smith (Eric Maturin), spread the rumour that Sanders is dead. Ferguson, sensing that trouble is afoot, leaves for the Old King's country on a peace mission, where he is murdered by King Mofalaba (Tony Wane). Not yet done, Mofalaba, who has been peeved by Bosambo's audacious obstruction of his slave raids into neighbouring ethnic groups, plots his elimination now that his white master and protector, Sanders, is out of the way, by kidnapping Bosambo's wife Lilongo (Nina Mae McKinney) to lure Bosambo into his trap. Bosambo falls for the trap and is captured. On learning of all these developments, Sanders who had been waiting for an auspicious moment to bring King Mofalaba to justice, sails up river in his steamboat, The Zaire, and arrives just in time to free the captives. The film ends with King Mofalaba killed and Bosambo installed in his place.

As earlier stated, one of the reasons why Sanders of the River was successful was because of the choice of subject matter: the problems of an archetypal colonial administrator, especially one who served in Africa. This choice of theme and characterization helped to strengthen the narrative, and I shall accordingly start my analysis through examination of its central character, Commissioner Sanders. Richards and Aldgate state that

the characteristics that Sanders embodies are entirely in line with the criteria actually employed to select colonial administrators. The selection was virtually controlled from 1910 to 1947 (with the exception of the World War I period) by one man — Sir Ralph Furse. Furse selected his men

specifically on the basis of character and recruited them mainly from public schools.⁵¹

Furse himself is famous for stating that without the calibre of men like Sanders, Britain would not have been able to run such a vast empire with a small band of men. In addition, he observed that "In England, universities train the mind; the public schools train character and teach leadership." Do their part, Richards and Aldgate state that the "public school taught duty and responsibility; a sense of fair play, qualities of leadership, above all a benevolent paternalism." District Commissioner, one would supposedly have served one's apprenticeship for years as a school prefect or would have held leadership positions in voluntary organisations like the Boy Scouts or the Boys' Brigade.

The character of Sanders is therefore drawn to embody all the foregoing qualities. He is fair and firm toward his subordinates; he is mild mannered and good humoured in the presence of his superiors; above all, he is benevolently paternalistic toward his subjects like Bosambo and the local chiefs appointed by him. Leslie Banks's interpretation of the role of Commissioner Sanders was deemed to be so realistically carried out that the Colonial Office came to project the Sanders character as a role–model for newly recruited District Commissioners. One of them, Charles Allen, has explicitly recorded the central role played by this film in the lives of newly recruited District Commissioners:

Most of us had seen a film called *Sanders of the River* before we went out, and suddenly here was the thing, and it was real, one was walking behind a long line of porters – and it was just like the film.⁵⁴

Another talked of the "Sanders of the River touch" in the description of the conduct of his duties.⁵⁵ The character of Sanders was therefore set up as an ideal model to which all would—be District Commissioners could aspire to. Since Sanders is the model character and protagonist, all other characters in the film tend to be defined in relation to him. Sanders is also the symbol of the uneven Afro—European power relation in this text. The measuring scale of both contending levels of authority is represented on opposing poles, by Mofalaba on the African side and Sanders on the British. The sequence which most graphically represents this uneven Afro—European power relation is that which deals with the meeting between Sanders and King Mofalaba after the first slave raid. I want to examine this sequence to show how power is projected in the text.

The sequence begins with a medium long shot of soldiers standing on guard with their bayonetted rifles at the ready. This is followed by a cut to Sanders, Tibbet, and Bosambo. Sanders orders the soldiers to stand at attention as Bosambo points with his spear towards King Mofalaba, arriving in an entourage of armed warriors. Three of them then sit to await Mofalaba's arrival – Sanders and Tibbet sit on chairs and Bosambo sits on the ground beside

Sanders. As Mofalaba's entourage gets closer, the soldiers adjust themselves, with their bayonetted rifles pointing aggressively toward them. This is followed by a cut back to King Mofalaba riding in a hammock. The entourage arrives at the meeting ground chanting a war song and a chair is placed for the king. Sanders gets up to acknowledge his arrival, both of them bow to each other and they sit down, with King Mofalaba sitting opposite Sanders. A hot exchange then ensues between them, beginning with Sanders telling him that he called him to palaver (meeting), but not with his warriors, and King Mofalaba replying that the guard of Sanders' little chief (Bosambo) killed the captain of his guard. Sanders replies that Mofalaba's captain heard his orders but did not obey them. Mofalaba reminds Sanders that he promised that they (Sanders' subjects) should keep their customs. He informs Sanders that it is one of their old customs to buy women. Sanders agrees, but adds that he permitted that only if the woman and the father consent. He warns Mofalaba that he will not tolerate slavery in his district. Mofalaba responds by reminding Sanders that his (Mofalaba's) forefathers have ruled the area for three hundred years, that he is the greatest king in the country. Sanders replies that his king is the greatest king on earth, that if little kings and chiefs disobey his king's order then he (Sanders) will remove them from their thrones.

At the end of this hot exchange Mofalaba pauses, and then asks Sanders what he wants. Sanders tells him to take his spear and men back to his (Mofalaba's) country and he (Sanders) will release Mofalaba's men in his prison. Mofalaba replies that he will do what Sanders want because both of them are friends, but that he has nine war drums over which are stretched the skins of any chief who offends him. Casting an evil look at Bosambo, he adds that he knows the skin that will be stretched on the tenth. Sanders then warns him that if he touches one servant of his king, be it as little as a pigeon, then Mofalaba won't be king any longer. He adds, as a measure of finality, that the meeting is finished. Both of them get up and as Mofalaba prepares to leave, he casts an evil look at Bosambo. The entourage leaves amidst humming, and Tibbet observes that he will be delighted to wring the king's neck, to which Sanders replies that the British taxpayers won't be delighted. When Tibbet asks why, Sanders replies that it will cost about one million pounds to do that, that war is an expensive thing.

Throughout this sequence, the authority of Sanders is visibly displayed. His soldiers are positioned at the meeting ground to respond to any eventuality should the meeting degenerate into confrontation. But even though Sanders has his troops stand by for the meeting, to intimidate Mofalaba, he disapproves of Mofalaba's right to self–defence. Authority and power is what is on display in this sequence. But this authority and power is, in the context of this sequence, tied to military prowess. From the way Sanders exercises power in this sequence, we know that British authority and power is established in the district through military superiority. It is this military superi-

ority that gives Sanders the sole authority to undermine indigenous power structures, as well as appoint British Warrant Chiefs. With respect to the representation of African culture, the payment of bride price is deliberately linked in the narrative with the institution of slavery so that the condemnation of slavery is used to denigrate marital customs. This linkage is fully exercised in the Bosambo-Lilongo marriage sequence, where Sanders uses his position as the sole authority in the district to impose a European concept of marriage, one man, one wife, upon Bosambo. In keeping with the conventions of colonialist African cinema, King Mofalaba is represented as a barbaric despot who will go to any extent to impose his authority on his subjects, including killing and stretching the skins of disloyal chiefs over his drums. In terms of spatial articulation, the dialogue between Sanders and Mofalaba is shot in shot/reverse shots, with a brief cut to Bosambo's reaction shot when Mofalaba says he knows the skin which will be stretched on his tenth drum. Though Sanders does not enjoy more spatial authority than Mofalaba in this sequence, the strength and authority of his speech reflects the imbalance of power between him and Mofalaba.

The relationship between both contending levels of authority is therefore based on suspicion, tension and violence. Sanders is always suspicious that the King is trying to undermine his authority, while the King sees the appointment of Warrant Chiefs who owe allegiance to the British colonial authorities as undermining his right to appoint chiefs. Characterization also reflects the general conventions of colonialist African discourse in which collaborators like Bosambo become the good African and traditional rulers like Mofalaba, who oppose British imperial presence, however self-centred such opposition may be, become the bad African. But ironically, too, the good African is the one who is treated with a lot of condescension, since the relationship between him and his British patrons is based on master-servant relationship, not on equality. For instance, the Bosambo character is tolerated and patronised by Sanders. When he appears before Sanders in the opening sequence of the film, for the purpose of the conferment of the title of chief of Ochori he remains standing while being addressed like a child summoned before his father or headmaster. To reduce him further in stature, Paul Robeson's huge frame notwithstanding, Sanders invokes his criminal past, his activities in Liberia. The fact that he is portrayed as a Liberian ex-convict symbolically links him up with Africans in diaspora, especially to African-Americans, since Liberia was created as a settlement colony for freed slaves of United States origin.

⁴⁹ Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate, Best of British Cinema and Society, 1930–1970 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1983), p. 25. 50 Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 16.

⁵² Ibid. cited, p. 16.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

As a Warrant Chief, Bosambo is a servant of British imperial authority. The chain of authority that dangles from his neck was often perceived by Africans during the colonial era as a symbol of collaboration, as pets of British imperialism. Hence, when confronted by Bosambo during a slave raid, the Captain of the Old King's warriors addresses Bosambo in terms used for pets by saying: "Whose dog are you?" However, as puppets of British imperialism, Warrant Chiefs enjoyed a lot of privileges. Beside wielding enormous authority on behalf of the British, their children enjoyed privileged education, thereby helping to perpetuate the tradition of a two-tier education system, with special elite schools forming the upper level, reserved for children of the emergent ruling class. This was how the idea of elite schools like Federal Government Colleges and Government Colleges was sown in countries like Nigeria. Bosambo is therefore reflecting this historical trend when he tells his wife, Lilongo, that if they persevere and remain in their present post, their children will have the opportunity to attend special schools for the children of chiefs.

In terms of characters' relationships, Sanders relates to Bosambo as well as other African characters in paternal terms. He supervises Bosambo's marriage to Lilongo and specifies the type of marriage by insisting upon one wife, one certificate. In line with this paternal relationship, when Lilongo is kidnapped by King Mofalaba and Bosambo is going to seek her release, he sends his children to Sanders to be brought up as wards of the government in case Mofalaba kills him in the mission. Furthermore, in comparison to Sanders, who has kept his sexual and marital life under control, the Bosambo character, as well as other African characters, are portrayed as sexually promiscuous. For instance, the scene that precedes the rescuing of the slave girls depicts Bosambo and the girls as sexually loose persons. In his inquiry before ordering the return of the girls to their families, with the exception of Lilongo, whom he permits to marry Bosambo, the girls begin their confessions of sexual liaison with Bosambo amidst giggling, an indication that they did not mind going to bed with Bosambo. On his part, as the girls begin their confessions, Bosambo begins to fidget like a reprimanded child, in keeping with the film's representation of Africans as children.

The film also registers that underneath Bosambo's meckness there is a valiant and dangerous underside. This is revealed in the battle scene where he confronts the Captain of the old king's warriors shortly after the slave raid and in the scene where he tries to teach his son the survival principles of his society. In this latter scene, a war song meant to portray him as a warmonger is introduced:

On, on into battle
Make the wardrums rattle
Mow them down like cattle
On and on, on into battle, stamp them into dust
Charge, kill, shoot, spill, and smash, smite,
slash, fight and slay!

The incorporation of this violence-laden war song seems to be the film's own way of explaining the root causes of violent activities like slave raids and inter-ethnic warfare in precolonial African societies. The film seems to suggest that the methods of instruction in precolonial Africa were responsible for inter-ethnic wars. Since one of the film's major themes is that of peace, peace in terms of total submission to British colonial authority, the film tends to blame this mode of instruction for lack of peace in colonial society. I have earlier stated that Mofalaba represents one of the contending levels of power and authority in this text by virtue of the fact that he symbolises traditional African authority. However, while Sanders, his contending opposite symbol of authority, is depicted as a fair and forthright ruler, the Mofalaba character is portrayed as a despot. This manner of representation is, however, not unique to Mofalaba. It is consistent with the conventional pattern of representing traditional African rulers in colonialist African cinema. The King Mofalaba character is thus a reproduction of similar character types such as Twala in King Solomon's Mines, Magole in Men of Two Worlds, Simba in Simba, etc. The traditional institution of authority is so derogatorily portrayed in Sanders of the River that no one is left in doubt of the necessity of British imperial presence.

The use of propaganda clips in the film is also part of the overall strategy of discrediting the ruling capacities of traditional African rulers while celebrating British imperial presence. What is celebrated in this instance is the efficacy of indirect rule as the propaganda clip shows:

AFRICA

Tens of millions of natives under British rule, each tribe with its own chieftain, governed and protected by a handful of whitemen whose everyday work is an unsung saga of courage and efficiency.

One of them was Commissioner Sanders.

With the penchant in colonialist films for spinning globes and maps, the propaganda clip in the opening sequence of the film is superimposed upon a fluttering British flag, the Union Jack, with the spinning globe signifying the all embracing nature of British colonial authority. But if indirect rule was efficient and cost effective, as the film seems to imply, it also encouraged divide—and—rule, bred favouritism, suspicion, rivalry, violence and the breach of peace, as the relationship between Mofalaba and Bosambo indicates — the very things colonial authority wanted to avoid.

In addition to his subordination to Sanders, Mofalaba is also portrayed to be childlike in nature, displayed most explicitly in the sequence in which he kills Ferguson. An instance of this childlikeness is shown during the brief verbal exchange between him and Ferguson. When Ferguson tells him that Sanders is alive and that Sanders will see to it that he, Mofalaba, is brought to justice if he kills him, Mofalaba retorts, childlike, that Sanders is dead, as he had been assured by the gun-runner, Smith. When Sanders has not been recalled from leave

and Father O'Leary comes to report to Ferguson the violent situation in the district, Ferguson remarks that the arsonists who burnt O'Leary's church acted just like wild beasts; rather, they are like misguided children and like a father, Ferguson must act quickly like Sanders would have done under similar circumstances. In another instance, Sanders, while introducing Ferguson to the chiefs of his district, addresses them the way a headmaster would normally address his pupils or, better still, the way a father would address his children. He specifically tells them that they should obey Ferguson as if they were Ferguson's own children.

Another colonialist trope exploited by the film is the representation of Africans as sexually promiscuous. This mode of representation is foregrounded through the examination of the traditional African marriage institution, with specific reference to polygamy. Polygamy is treated in the film as an index of sexual promiscuity. For instance, when the slave girls attempt to submit themselves voluntarily in marriage to Bosambo en masse, Sanders first applies all sorts of subterfuges to dissuade them. When that does not seem to work, he puts his foot down and insists that Bosambo must practise the doctrine of one man one wife. The girls' readiness to marry Bosambo in spite of the fact that he has sexually exploited them can be considered an indication of their sexual permissiveness. Furthermore, the choice of erotic African fertility dances featuring bare-breasted girls is also informed by this underlying colonialist convention. These dances, which are featured for a fairly lengthy time during the Bosambo/Lilongo marriage sequence, and also during the victory dance sequence when captured female slaves are displayed in the sequence following the departure of Sanders on leave, do not only represent Africans as sexually permissive people but also as primitive and barbaric.

In the Bosambo/Lilongo marriage sequence, for instance, the shots switch from male dancers to barebreasted dancing girls, to a set of women breast-feeding babies, to a group of children already perfecting the sexual rhythms of the dance. The shots therefore appear ordered to represent the awesome procreational machinery of traditional African societies. The intention in this instance, as well as in similar ones already cited, is to portray the totality of African social experience as primitive and barbaric. More broadly, dances are utilised in the marriage sequence, both to create an erotic atmosphere as well as to present African cultural practices to Western spectators as part of the film's package.

Although the film sets out to celebrate indirect rule in Anglophone Africa, it also paradoxically exposes the fragility of the whole practice. As Richards and Aldgate observe:

There is an implicit subtext in the apparent fragility of British rule, given that it collapses the moment Sanders leaves the scene. One of the great paradoxes of British imperial history was the simultaneous dominance of twin emotions, confi-

dence and fear – confidence in the rightness of British presence in far–off lands and fear that British rule would be violently overthrown. ⁵⁶

The news of the death of Sander appropriately demonstrates the fragility that Richards and Aldgate refer to. The commotion which the news of his death brings to the carefully painted picture of a district, peaceful as an Edenic paradise, also symbolises the underlying fragility of British colonial rule as represented in Sanders of the Rivers. For instance, once the news of his death is relayed through the district in drum messages, there is a sequence of shots representing the rapid slippage of Africans into savagery. This social degeneration or descent into barbarism is shown in the form of a resumption and celebration of slave raids, a man rapidly climbing a tall coconut tree bare-handedly, and of animals lumbering in and out of water, as if in joyful celebration of the absence of the law from the river. Though the whole sequence is structured to signify a return to the old regime of jungle justice, it has inadvertently ended up portraying the fragility of British colonial rule through the exploitation of potentiality for such relapse.

In conclusion, though Sanders of the River is not the first film to institute the conventions of colonialist African cinema, that tradition having been initiated by the Tarzan jungle series of films, there is no doubt that it stands out today as a classic example of the sub-genre of films that it inaugurated, the colonial burden films. These films propagated the necessity for colonial rule. However, their attempts to reflect the contradictions of colonial societies often negate this message, thereby exposing the fragility of the whole project. This becomes both a lamentation and an acknowledgement of the burden of colonial rule. Evidence of this textual pattern can be glimpsed from Sanders of the River, Men of Two Worlds, Mister Johnson, etc., where attempts to portray the power play of colonial societies and the rationalisation of colonialism result in the exposure of the fragility of the whole system.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.



On Pluralism, Policy and Progress: a response to R.L. Cagle.

by Robin Wood

'The truth lies, not in one dream, but in many'
- Pasolini, Arabian Nights.

'If we lose the past, we lose the future'

- William D. MacGillivray (in a still unproduced screenplay).

Pully to answer R.L. Cagle's critique (in No. 36) of my article (in No. 35) would be tedious in the extreme, as I have objections to virtually every sentence in this tissue of distortions, misreadings and misrepresentations. I shall therefore be selective, starting with a few minor points and working up to the major issues.

1. Cagle 'starts as he means to go on', with a remarkable bit of attempted sleight-of- hand. He hopes that 'Mr. Wood will not see this piece as an attack on him personally' (which sounds encouraging), then immediately adds 'as he has other criticisms of his work'. He does not specify where or when, so the interested reader is allowed no opportunity to check on the justice of this verdict. He then goes on to describe such behaviour as 'pettiness'. How, may I ask, am I to take that, if not 'personally'? Is 'pettiness' not a personal attribute? The hypocrisy is clear, and so is its function: a transparent ploy to embarrass me into not responding - if I do, then I am just being 'petty' again. But I am not so easily intimidated. Let me assure Cagle, however, that I do not intend to reciprocate his tactics: I shall not pepper the response with such obviously 'personal' epithets as 'simplistic', 'selfish', 'ridiculous', 'ignorant' and 'moronic'.

- 2. Cagle devotes a whole paragraph to complaining that I quote the phrase 'at best idiosyncratic, at worst offensive' without a citation - which shows 'what an inflated sense of self-importance Wood has of himself (sic). I write in CineAction primarily for its regular readers and, since the editors of No. 32 attracted so much attention, with their 'dissent', to my article on 'Brown Persons', I assumed readers would recognize the phrase. (How Cagle can see this simple, good-humoured reference as my 'setting out to even the score with some unnamed other' I don't quite see. I don't keep scores, though I do sometimes find it necessary to defend myself.) What is strange is that Cagle has just been guilty of exactly the same offence. He, at least, appears to have recognized the quotations; if he thinks readers should have been informed of its source, why doesn't he inform them? (See also 1., above).
- 3. I'm sorry Cagle resorts to the shabby tactic of quoting remarks out of context. When I said I was equally appalled 'by the total lack of generosity on the one hand, the reckless and misguided enthusiasm on the other', it is clear from the context that I referred only to the critical reception of *Philadelphia* and *Zero Patience* respectively; Cagle transforms it into a com-



ment about gay critics in general. Perhaps this is supposed to establish my 'dismissive attitude toward a whole genre of politically–informed criticism' – I can find nothing else in my article that might suggest such a thing. I opened it by asserting that 'we need to learn to listen to many different voices, and to respect the validity of different positions...', and nothing later in the article contradicts that assertion.

- 4. The section of Cagle's article I find most offensive is that concerning my marriage and my attitude to women (nothing just a tiny bit personal here, Mr. Cagle?). To save long quotation, references are to page 6, column 2, bottom, and what follows.
- a. On 'having sex with another human being': it is surely obvious that had I written 'woman' it would be taken as implying that I had already had sex with men; as the human being's gender is made clear by the end of the same sentence, I scarcely think it has been 'written out'.
- b. Cagle is not personally to blame for his insensitivity to the nuances of spoken English: it is the product of a rigid 'political correctness' that finds no space for either nuance or complexity. He quotes me on the belief generated by my headmaster's version of sex education '...that the woman had to hold some mysterious part of herself open while you peed into her', and objects to my use of 'you' on the grounds that lesbians would have difficulty identifying with it. He clearly assumes that 'you' there means 'the reader'; presumably he is unaware of the colloquial usage that means 'you, my peers in the situation described', i.e. twelve-year-old boys at British boarding-schools in the '40s. I take this as a small but instructive instance of the extent to which the flexibility and expressiveness of 'English as she is spoke' is being eroded.
- c. 'Women seem to exist solely to bear the burden of Wood's heterosexuality...' It seems to me quite clear that that part of my article described a very specific cultural situation: middle–class marriage in Britain in the early (and for most people still pre– feminist) '60s. Being incapable of responding to nuance, Cagle completely misses the passage's ironies. I do not write 'as though sexuality were neither a part of marriage nor a

part of heterosexuality'; I describe one particular marriage in which the disastrous flaw was precisely my inability to respond authentically to the woman's sexual desire, an inability for which I suffered agonies of guilt, frustration and remorse. Both my wife and I slipped automatically into the ideological assumptions of that time and place: despite the fact that she had a university degree of equal status to my own, we both took it for granted that I was the one whose career counted, while her role was to take second place and be, first and foremost, a good wife and mother. Is it really necessary for me to say, with the longstanding commitment to feminism which I reiterate yet again in the article, that I am today thoroughly ashamed of assumptions I held unquestioningly thirty years ago? That my wife's woman-friends envied her is certainly ironic, but within that cultural situation it had its reasons: their husbands never lifted a finger to help with the kids, cook, or do housework. The conclusion drawn by Cagle speaks only for his total unawareness of social history.

- 5. Cagle chastizes me, predictably, for speaking of 'AIDS victims'. Then, at the end of his article, with a deviousness that I'm afraid is characteristic, the word has suddenly acquired the adjective 'helpless'. 'Helpless' is Cagle's word; it is certainly not mine. It seems to me perfectly legitimate to speak of someone as the 'victim' of a currently incurable disease: indeed, the word has a special appropriateness, as it implies that the condition is in no way the victim's fault, is neither just nor fair. I am myself a victim of leukemia, but I am 'helpless' only in one very limited sense: while the disease remains incurable, even if I don't die of it, when I die I shall still have it, and there is nothing I can do about that. Beyond that I am not helpless in the least, any more than AIDS victims who are prepared to fight for their lives, their health and their rights.
- **6.** I am further taken to task for saying that 'desire' is merely the 'projection of one's ego'. I didn't. I said that the '<u>image</u> of our desire' is, in a passage about the need to accept one another's difference. How many promising relationships have been ruined by the lover's impo-



sition of an ideal image on a partner who can't possibly live up to it and shouldn't be expected to try? And where can this ideal image have its source other than in the ego? (I should acknowledge here my own source for this, in Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*).

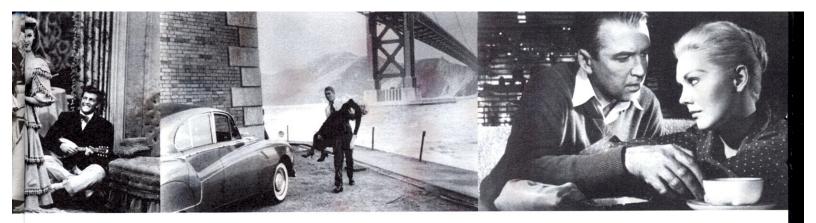
- 7. Cagle objects (strenuously and at length) to my using the term 'heterosexual mainstream'. Can anyone seriously doubt that our culture has been overwhelmingly dominated by heterosexuals and their concerns, and that gays have been variously marginalized, or treated as non-persons, or viciously persecuted? One might read virtually every novel written before the twentieth century without discovering that homosexual desire existed; if there are exceptions, they have remained strictly 'underground'. This despite the fact that some of their authors were gay.
- 8. Cagle's next step is to accuse Richard Lippe and myself of 'privileging' the 'heterosexual mainstream' (he even goes on to describe me, by a further step of his idiosyncratic 'logic', as 'heterosexual'). It should be obvious from our work that we do not privilege it because it is heterosexual but because it is dominant. What we are interested in, as gay men, is exploring how its heterosexist and patriarchal hegemony is repeatedly threatened and undermined within so many of its own products: works such as Two-Faced Woman or Meet Me in St. Louis - or Vertigo, or The Reckless Moment, or Scarlet Street, or I Walked with a Zombie, or hundreds more - that call into question the very structures of the heterosexist/patriarchal system and the values it is supposed to embody and reinforce. I would describe the main purpose of my work over the past twenty years (as critic, novelist and screenwriter) as the undermining of heterosexual security and certitude. I claim this as a not merely compatible but necessary complement to the more direct and confrontational work of gay militants. While the patriarchal hegemony remains intact or dominant, there will be no space for the full acceptance and recognition of gavs and lesbians and for their integration (with not only tolerance but respect, and a readiness to listen to and learn from them) within the culture.

9. My concern with the past follows on logically from this. I continue to take an active and positive interest in my own culture, its traditions, its achievements: If there is so much to be critical of, there is also so much that it is important to preserve, re–examine, reinterpret, revalue, and learn to use. We are being asked today, quite rightly, to respect and honour the cultures of others; it strikes me as a quite unnecessary (and indeed illogical) corollary that we should therefore despise and condemn our own (or merely shrug it off, from our position of superior knowledge, as passé). A culture without a past is doomed to become the most shallow and superficial imaginable, and we seem already well on our way to that.

Cagle complains again that I don't cite specific sources for this sense that our past is vanishing (which I dealt with at some length in the 'Brown Persons' article already mentioned). I can't: No one, as far as I know, has actually said in so many words 'The traditions and achievements of our culture are no longer deserving of thought or discussion'. I am referring to a pervasive current practice and attitude which I can illustrate briefly from my own experience.

Regular readers will be aware of how often I have benefited from the generous support of the Ontario Arts Council. A few years ago I had the pleasure of serving on one of its juries. I found the whole process of deciding awards admirably fair: the atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, everyone was allowed a voice, no pressure was brought to bear. I remember asking, as a new juror, whether we were expected to favour Canadian content even though this was not specified in the guidelines, and was assured that this was not the case at all, that each submission must be judged on its merits, without prejudice. I look back on the meeting as a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

Over the years, I have submitted eight applications for 'Arts Writing' grants, and five have been accepted. The first of these, six years ago I think, was for an article on Ozu, and it has proven to be very much the exception to the rule. The other four were for articles on William MacGillivray, Anne Wheeler, racial representation (which became the 'Brown Persons' article) and 'Queer Cinema' (which became the article in No.



35): two on contemporary filmmakers (who also happen to be Canadian), and two on highly fashionable concerns. The three that were rejected were for articles on Renoir, Mizoguchi and Pasolini; I regard all three as much stronger applications, and certainly they were more detailed, less tentative. They were also submitted either two or three times, so they went before, in all, about eight different juries. I cannot attribute this tendency of preference to any instructions, or even subtle hints, emanating from the Arts Council and what one might think would be its priorities. What I am being told by these eight juries is therefore quite clear: there is no need any more for discussion of the major achievements of the past; we must concern ourselves solely with what is happening today. This is the message I have received from at least forty of my contemporary peers in the Ontario arts community.

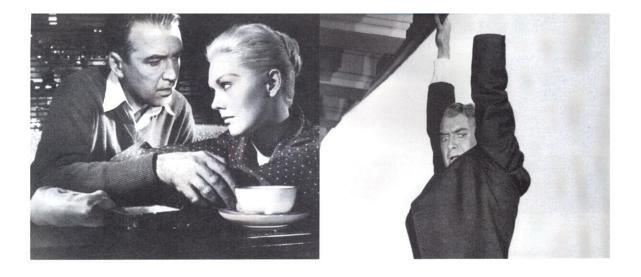
10. I seem especially to incur Cagle's wrath when I suggest that gays and lesbians might, because they are 'not encumbered with all the heterosexual baggage of traditional marriage-and-family', be in a position to lead the way toward saner, more open and flexible, forms of social/sexual organization, freed from the destructive (in so many diverse ways) forces of jealousy, 'romantic love' and possessiveness. He pretends not to understand what I am referring to, though I make it quite clear: a new order of 'free relating', as I define it. I personally find great encouragement in believing that gays and lesbians, if they could free themselves of the stubborn legacy of acquired values and emotions, might play a vital, even crucial, role in defining the future of our civilization, moving from the margin to the centre, and I have difficulty in grasping why Cagle considers such an idea so reprehensible. What follows (page 7, column 2) appears to suggest, in its heavy-handed sarcasm, that I am ignorant of all the current forms of discrimination against gays and lesbians in our overwhelmingly heterosexist culture, a suggestion I find too ridiculous for further comment.

He also wishes to know how I can afford 'to direct [my] energies' toward a future where 'we all "just get along". (Those last three words are <u>not</u> a quotation, though they are made to look like one). <u>I</u> wish to

know, in turn, what future Cagle envisages? It seems likely that, as it becomes less painful to 'come out', the numbers of openly gay and lesbian people will increase; but we shall presumably always be in a minority. If we cannot 'get along' with heterosexuals (or, as I would prefer to say, 'achieve mutual acceptance and goodwill'), then the future must continue to look pretty bleak for us. What does he propose? Apartheid? Unending conflict? He remains silent on the topic. My 'fantasmatic utopian future' is a culture in which all forms of sexuality that are not harmful to others (e.g. the many varieties of harassment, molestation and exploitation) - everything on the spectrum from hetero- to homo-, with every shade of bi- - are fully and unquestioningly accepted. This is the future toward which all the current relevant progressive movements (gay rights, feminism, the interrogation of gender) point. I think we should ponder its feasibility just a little before we dismiss it with a sneer as 'fantasmatic'.

11. Cagle states that my 'dislike' of Zero Patience 'seems to be based entirely' on my belief that the film 'cannot succeed in reaching' the heterosexual mainstream. If this were the case, would it not be a little odd that I also praise The Making of Monsters and express the greatest enthusiasm for R.S.V.P., both of which, because of their 'short subject' format, stand virtually no chance of even getting a commercial release? I did try to raise the question (which still seems to me a valid one) of 'Whom is this film for? - To what audience is this directed?' Its arguments were already familiar to me, as a gay man very much aware of the varieties and strategies of gay activism, and I assumed they would be to most of the other gay men who seem to have comprised the film's audience; its messages would have far greater importance beyond the gay community. (And 'messages' is the right word: Rand Gener in the Feb. 28th Village Voice summed it up less kindly as 'John Greyson's tediously in-your-face musical). But I made it clear that my main objection to the film was to the ineptness of its realization (a subject its defenders don't talk about very much). If a film's manifest intentions are extremely important and urgent, does it then not matter that its execution evokes for the most part an end-of- semester undergraduate revue?





12. What Cagle's position boils down to is precisely the assumption I wish to question: that there is a fixed set of issues that gay critics today must discuss, and a fixed set of things they must say about them; anyone who wishes to raise issues outside this set (even if they are not incompatible) must be repudiated. The attitude is illustrated clearly enough in Cagle's own attempts at criticism: his remarks on *Philadelphia* merely repeat the 'correct' view already set forth in numerous publications (it is not necessary to answer Richard Lippe's defence of the film – the very fact that it is a defence proves that it must be wrong). Similarly, his comments on *Zero Patience* rehearse once again what the film's defenders have already spelt out (and what, indeed, the film itself so insistently tells us it is doing).

13. I think I should clarify the intended connotations of my subheading ('An Irresponsible Article'), as they have proved less obvious than I realized. First, it was meant ironically: I always try to write responsibly about things that seem important to me; the article is 'irresponsible' only in refusing the straitjacket of a rigid and repressive political correctness. Second, it seemed a concise way of referring back to my 'coming out' lecture/article of over twenty–five years ago, 'Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic', which many gay people tell me they have read. Third, it was a return homage to Gregg Araki: the subtitle of *The Living End* ('An Irresponsible Movie') was, as he explains in the interview that immediately followed my article, a homage to me.

14. Finally, I think the most useful thing Cagle has done is to give me an opportunity to explain something to our readers in general, when he wonders 'why the editors' own work comprises just over half of the issue. (In fact, virtually the only unsolicited submission we received was a long, very well–written piece on *Philadelphia*; we hesitated over it for some time, but it

seemed to us that it merely repeated what had already been said so many times elsewhere).

CineAction was founded, ten years ago, by a group of writers. We weren't interested in editing, or in administration - and least of all in the tedious work (which we still largely do) of subscription mailing and distribution. We wanted a magazine for which we could write, and we founded CineAction for that purpose, putting up with the other necessary labours, there being no such magazine in existence in Canada. We even had a rule: any member of the collective who wrote nothing for three consecutive issues should resign. In that way we lost Lori Spring, Maureen Judge and Anthony Irwin, who decided that they had other, conflicting ambitions. The first two became filmmakers, as subsequently did Bryan Bruce, now the internationally celebrated Bruce LaBruce of Super 8 1/2. Other members came in to replace them, and some had very different ideas and priorities, wishing to open the magazine to as many outsiders as possible, willingly becoming editors first, writers second. But certain of the surviving original collective still stand by the original principle and, while we respect the others' right to organize their issues as they please in relation to their own ideals, we also claim the reciprocal right for ourselves. Richard and I make no apologies for seeing our issues of CineAction at least partly as vehicles for our work: that is why we remain on the collective. We are proud of our 'gay' issue: it represents very much what we wanted. I would add that it was my decision from the outset that Richard's article on Cukor and Garbo would form the centrepiece of the issue, with everything else structured around it: it seems to me precisely the kind of socially and politically responsible work that a film journal, today, should be publishing.

This should explain why each issue of *CineAction* nowadays has its own particular character and its own type of inner coherence, reflecting the interests and position of its editors.



Firoza Elavia is completing her MFA in Film at York University in Toronto.

Marcy Goldberg is a student in the Graduate Programme in Film and Video at York University in Toronto.

John McCullough is a part-time teacher at York University working in the area of television history and criticism.

Femi Okiremuete Shaka has recently completed his Ph.D. in the Joint School of Film and Literature at the University of Warwick in England.

Julian Stringer is a graduate student in the Film Studies Program at Indiana University-Bloomington.

Cosimo Urbano is working on a Ph.D. in Cinema Studies at New York University.

Jerry White is on the program staff of the Neighborhood Film/Video Project and the Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema.

Robin Wood is pissed off with agents and publishers but is still persevering; he continues to work with Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, who is now a resident of Canada.

